Young Carers in Education
Supporting rural and remote young carers
About Carers Australia

Carers Australia is the national peak body advocating on behalf of Australia’s 2.6 million carers. Our Vision is that “caring is accepted as a shared community responsibility” and Our Mission is “to lead change and action with and for carers.”

Carers are people who provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends with a disability, mental illness, chronic condition, terminal illness or who are frail aged.

Carers Australia works with the state and territory Carers Associations to achieve:
- improved health, wellbeing and resilience for carers
- a more secure financial position for carers
- increased recognition of carers
- a comprehensive evidence base to inform policy and decision-makers.

Carers Australia advocates on behalf of Australia’s carers to influence policies, programs and services at a national level. Carers Australia also manages a range of national programs including the National Carer Counselling Program, the Carer Advisory Service, the Young Carer Information and Support Program and the Better Start for Children with a Disability Registration and Information Service.

About this booklet

This booklet provides information to schools about young carers in rural and remote Australia. The aim of the booklet is to raise awareness of the unique challenges faced by young carers living in rural and remote Australia. The booklet has been funded by the Australian Government, Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations and is an initiative of Carers Australia. This booklet was produced by Carers SA on behalf of Carers Australia. Carers SA would like to recognise the assistance of State and Territory Carers Associations and Carers Australia in producing this booklet.

The views expressed in this booklet are those of the contributors and authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government.

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How do I know if there are young carers in my classroom?

Every school has young carers, on average 2 or 3 in every class. Teachers and School Counsellors are ideally placed to identify young carers, support them at school, and link them with services that can assist them in their caring role at home.

Young carers are often reluctant or unable to identify themselves. Some carers feel they shouldn’t discuss their family’s problems, while others find it difficult to ask for help.

Some young carers fear there may be repercussions if they identify themselves as a young carer.

Other young people may simply not realise they are a young carer.

For some young carers school is the one ‘normal’ part of their life and they don’t want everyone to know about their caring role.

Young carers may have been caring from as young as six or seven years of age, or in some cases even younger; or the family member they care for may have only recently become ill. Being identified as a young carer means that services can be put in place to support the young carer and their family.

“I told the teachers about how I have to care for my brother and the teachers saw this as drawing attention to myself. They didn’t want to know what my life was like outside of school.”

“I haven’t told the teachers about how I am a young carer. I don’t want the school to know. I want to have a normal life”

“My Mum told the school about how I care for Dad and it’s really helped. The teachers are more understanding and the School Counsellor has set up a young carer group every Tuesday lunch time. It’s good to know there are other kids like me’”

“It’s good the other teachers know, but I don’t want their pity”
My name’s Nikki. I’m 13 and I take care of my Dad.

We live in the Murraylands in South Australia. I’ve been helping Dad out for about 8 years, since Mum left. Dad has kidney problems, diabetes and vision problems. He’s often in pain which makes him tired and stressed. The main things I do are cooking and cleaning and helping my brother and sister. Dad doesn’t work anymore as there aren’t any jobs in town for someone with his illness. It means we have to be super careful with money so I don’t always have everything I need for school. I really want to get Carers Allowance from Centrelink, but the person I spoke to said I’m not old enough yet. I should be, I spend lots of time caring for Dad.

I go with Dad to his medical appointments to help him out. Sometimes it means going to the city on the bus, so I miss school that day. Dad has good and bad days, so I don’t always get my schoolwork done. I wish teachers would be more understanding with extensions and stuff. Dad told the teachers about how I have to help out at home, but I’d rather all the other kids didn’t know. They don’t understand what it’s like caring for someone. Maybe if we learnt more in class about people with disabilities then kids would get it. I have to be really responsible, I’m like the grown-up not the kid.

There is counselling available at school but the school counsellor is one of my friend’s mums so I’d rather not talk to her. She told me I’m a young carer and referred me to some young carer counselling which feels more private. It’s good to have someone to talk to. I’d like to go to a young carer group but it’s a long drive, it’s too hard to get there. I went on a young carer camp last year and that was great to talk to other kids who understand. I Facebook with some of my friends from the camp now. I sometimes think about what it will be like when I’m grown up. I’d have to leave town if I want to go to uni. Who would look after Dad? It might be easier to just get a job here in town, then we’ll be together still.

How can I help young carers in the classroom?

Flexibility with homework and assignment expectations is one of the key things which young carers say would help them to balance their schoolwork with their caring role at home.

Caring can be unpredictable, especially where a family member has a mental illness. Teachers may need to be understanding when work is unable to be handed in on the due date.

Children who are living with someone who has a serious condition or fragile mental state can find it hard to concentrate at school if they feel they are unable to be easily contacted in an emergency. Flexible policy surrounding mobile phone use can help young carers to relax and engage in class, knowing they can be contacted if needed.

“It would’ve really helped if I could’ve had my mobile phone on at school, so Mum could’ve contacted me if she had fallen. Instead I would just worry about her.” (Naomi, young carer, age 17, Far North Queensland)
What strategies can my school put in place to support young carers?

It is good practice for a school to have a young carer policy. In developing your policy you should consider the following:

- Ask families when they enrol at the school whether anyone in the family has a caring role and note this on the student’s file.
- Ensure information about caring responsibilities is shared with appropriate teaching staff, especially when students transition from one year level to the next, or move schools.
- Appoint a key contact person, e.g. the school counsellor, who can link young carers and their families to support and assistance within the school and within the local community.
- Individual education plans to support the young carer.
- School guidelines which enable flexibility with homework, assignments and curriculum selection.
- Facility for young carers to contact home when needed.
- Professional development for all school staff in how they can identify and support young carers. This may include specific information about local and regional support options.
- An integrated whole school strategy to promote full understanding, acceptance of and respect of young carer issues. Including –
  - Curricula at all year levels on disabilities, mental and physical ill-health and substance misuse.
  - Articles and stories in the school newsletter promoting awareness of young carers and local support networks.
  - School networks or groups for students for young carers and their friends.
What are some of the challenges for young carers?

Poverty is a fact of life for many young people living in families experiencing illness or disability. Even for families in which parents are working, medical expenses may be crippling, and remote locations can mean less choice and further expense. For other families who need to rely on government benefits money can be very tight indeed.

Employment for adults with disabilities, mental illness, or chronic illness is often problematic in country areas where work opportunities are limited, and where a driver’s licence may be a necessity to get to work.

Families may also find the stigma of mental illness can be a barrier to finding work in a small community where everyone knows everyone else. Many teenage young carers will look for work to contribute to the family income, which can affect their capacity to stay engaged with their education.

Young carers may be able to apply for Carer Allowance or Carer Payment from Centrelink, or to apply for assistance with school expenses.

I’m Jarrod, I’m 16.

I moved in with Gran when I was 10 because my Mum couldn’t look after us, but I mostly look after Gran now. She has trouble with her back and has arthritis so I do the housework and a lot of the cooking. My little cousin Corrie lives with us too. Gran doesn’t drive so it’s up to me to make sure Corrie and I get to school. He’s a real pain sometimes and makes me late, so I get in trouble with my home teacher.

I haven’t told the school about looking after Gran and Corrie – I worry they’d make me move somewhere else, and I’d rather be with my family since Mum’s gone. I got a job making pizzas to bring in extra money since Gran’s on a pension and then we eat the leftover pizzas at home. It means I don’t have much time for schoolwork though. The teachers don’t understand, they just think I’m a bit of a loser. If they weren’t so hard on me I’d probably make more of an effort, but it doesn’t seem worth it when I’m going to need to keep taking care of Gran. I’m thinking about leaving school anyway and working full time.

My name is Nathan, I’m 15. I look after my brother Logan – he’s 8 and has Autism.

Mum and Dad look after him too, but I help him around the house and look out for him after school while Mum and Dad are on the farm. We live near a small town out West in New South Wales. There’s only one paid carer available in our area that can care for my brother so it’s hard for us to have a holiday or even a break. Logan and I go to school together on the bus and I make sure he’s safe. Sometimes Logan goes right off in the mornings and we miss the bus. There isn’t another bus so either Mum drives us or we don’t get to school.

Caring doesn’t really affect my schoolwork; sometimes he stops me doing my homework and stuff, but mostly it affects things like recess and lunch, when I always have to look out for Logan. I can be late for class because I have to make sure he’s ok first. I don’t want to be different but Logan makes me stand out as different. The teachers don’t really take much notice of me caring. There are no other schools in town anyway so I have to make the most of it. Mum was in an Autism group and heard about young carers, so I went on a young carer retreat. It was cool to talk to other young carers and get a break from Logan.
Are there signs I can look for that indicate a student may be a young carer?

Caring for someone in their family can have an impact on many areas of a young person’s life. For some young carers, providing care can be a positive aspect of having a relative with a disability or illness. Caring can help build strong, loving family relationships, develop valuable life skills, and generate feelings of pride and self-worth.

The experience of caring for a family member can lead some young carers to choose school subjects and career pathways in caring professions. However, it is important not to assume all carers will feel this way. In some states young carers are able to use their caring role to obtain credit towards Year 11 or 12.

Some researchers suggest that only 4% of young carers between the ages of 15 to 25 years are still in education, as compared to 23% of their peers. Some studies have shown that 60% of young carers aged 15 to 25 are unemployed or not in the paid workforce, as compared to 38% of the general population of 15 to 25 year olds.
How can I support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young carers in my area?

Disability, mental illness and chronic disease have a higher prevalence overall among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia than for other Australians, with earlier onset of many chronic conditions. Combined with high levels of social disadvantage and isolation in rural and remote areas, the result is an enormous responsibility of care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and young people.

For example, around 50% of the population where Shania lives are under 19 years of age, with fewer elders and higher rates of chronic illness than the general community. This means many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people take on a larger caring role than other young people in rural and remote areas.

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities the role of caring for someone with an illness or disability is often shared amongst the extended family according to notions of reciprocity and obligation. For families from remote communities who have to travel to access medical care, dislocation from country and kin can disrupt these relationships and may bring shame to the family.

Extended family relationships may be broad and complex, so identifying a single carer to receive support services is often inappropriate. It is unusual for young people to identify as a ‘young carer’.

It is also common for children to be living with grandparents or other older relatives who themselves are frail or have illnesses requiring care.

A lack of culturally appropriate services in rural and remote locations can make it hard for families to access mainstream services such as Carer Respite, Carer Support groups and Carer Allowance and Carer Payment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young carers have the same rights to services to support their education as other young people - Teachers and School Counsellors can play a key role in linking them to these services.

“It can be a challenge getting services in place for our people but I find a holistic, whole-of-family approach works best; so the young person isn’t singled out. Often there is a level of mistrust of mainstream services so I try to work in partnership with the local Aboriginal community.”

Aboriginal Carer Support Worker, Pt Augusta, SA.

“I’m Shania, I’m 14. We are Bungala people.

I care for Dad who has diabetes, my little sister who has ADHD, and my Grandma who is blind. Grandma used to live on Country but she needs to live with us now to see the doctors. I wouldn’t call myself a young carer - our family takes care of our family - that’s just the way it is for us.

The lady from the local carer group offered for someone to come in and help out with the cooking and cleaning but we don’t want people outside our family looking after us. I don’t mind my school, I go there most days but if my family are sick they come first. There are funerals that our family need to be at - sorry business can take a few days by the time you get there and back so I need to help Dad and Grandma. I don’t go to the young carer group but I sometimes go along to family carer activities. They arranged for me to have some tutoring which helps me with school.”

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“School Principals, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Aides, Liaison Officers, Community Based Attendance Officers and an Education Department representative met as a monthly action committee to work out why children weren’t attending school. One particular issue stood out – the child or children concerned had a caring role in the family. I was able to help put services in place, such as tutoring, to support the students’ education.”

Young Carer Worker, Broome, WA.
What do we know about young carers from diverse cultural backgrounds?

Regional Australia is home to families from many different cultures and language groups. Care of younger children by older siblings, and care of elderly and frail relatives by younger family members is common for many cultural groups and these young people don’t think of themselves or identify as young carers.

Culturally and linguistically diverse carers may not wish to access home and community care services, or there may be no local services who are culturally appropriate or speak their language.

Young carers will often need to take on the task of dealing with English speaking health services and government agencies.

In particular, families from refugee backgrounds may have past traumatic experiences, which may lead to higher levels of mental illness. Different cultural understandings of mental illness may make it difficult for families to seek treatment and support.

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My name is Lala, I’m 10.

I live in a little town with my mother and three brothers. We came to Australia when I was 4. My Mum has a few different illnesses but she doesn’t speak English very well so I need to explain to the doctor and tell her what people like doctors and chemists say. My brothers can’t go with her because they are boys.

When she goes to Melbourne to see the specialist doctor my big brother takes her on the bus and sometimes I need to go too to translate and help her. I do a lot of the cooking and cleaning and looking after my brothers so it can be hard to find time for school work. Mum does the housework when she’s well but sometimes her memories are too bad and she has to go to bed. It’s much better here in Australia though, we are all together.
How can I help young carers succeed at school?

Emma-Jane cares for her mother, Carol, who has Bipolar. Emma-Jane is now at university in Perth studying to be a psychologist. She is upbeat about her future but will always care for her Mum. Emma-Jane credits the understanding and support from her Teachers, School Counsellor and Principal as a key factor in enabling her to balance school with caring and ensuring she could go on to university.

With thanks to my teachers,
It was the little things you did which made all the difference.
When you understood...
That I love my Mum and needed to be with her, and if I had to choose between school and Mum then she would always win.
That it took courage to tell the school about Mum, I didn't want to have to repeat my story every day, to every teacher that asked.
That I was doing my best - when I told you I was tired and stressed, it was true. And when I told you I hadn't finished work, or was late, or was away because I was caring for Mum, I wasn't making excuses, it was just the way my life was.
That sometimes I just needed someone to listen, accept and not judge me. In some ways I just wanted to be treated like everyone else. School was often my escape. I was glad when I just got there - you made me feel that you were too. It made such a difference when you were.

Thank-you for linking me up with my young carer group. If you hadn't told me then I wouldn't have known they were there. They let me know I wasn't the only kid in the world caring for someone in their family. Meeting other young Carers on camp was such a great experience. I still keep in touch with my young carer friends now and it's a life-saver.

Thank-you for encouraging me to try young carer counselling. I needed more information about Mum's illness and how to cope with looking after someone. They helped with that and gave me someone to talk to.

Things were so much better when I started getting help at home from the Respite Centre - it meant I had some time for me. They helped me get Carer Allowance from Centrelink which made such a difference. Before that we were always short of money to have the things I needed for school.

Thank-you for realising how hard it was to decide to go away to uni and supporting my decisions. I often feel guilty. I need to do the things other young women do, but I still worry about Mum. It's never simple. Now my little brother is taking care of Mum - please take care of him too.
Are there services to support young carers?
How can I connect my students to local support services?

Families who are living with disability and chronic illness often find that respite and care services are limited in rural and remote locations, especially if care needs are very specific or intensive. This means the responsibility of care continually falls to the family including children or siblings.

Young carers talk a lot about needing a break from their caring role. In some small towns there is only one school, so rather than giving them a break from caring, the responsibility to care for a sibling continues whilst at school.

In many parts of country Australia families need to travel to the city to access medical care. For young carers this can mean time out of school to accompany the parent or sibling who is unwell, or for some teenage carers it means they need to take on a greater role in looking after younger siblings or elderly relatives while parents attend appointments in the city.

Mental health services are often especially limited in many country areas. Teachers and School Counsellors can refer young carers to the National Young Carer Program which can offer respite, counselling and other support services.

For information on
Young Carer Programs
Phone 1800 242 636
and speak to your local Carers Association

- Information  
- Advocacy  
- Counselling  
- Transport  
- Tutoring  
- Financial assistance  
- Respite - taking time out  
- Referral to local support groups  
- School holiday activities, camps and retreats

"Because of his physical disabilities my brother has undergone numerous operations. I get really stressed whenever he becomes unwell or goes to hospital. It’s impossible for me to think about my schoolwork.
Owen, young carer, age 16, Eastern Victoria"

I’m Cassie, I care for my Mum who has a degenerative nerve disorder.

We live on the East Coast of Tassie and I’m doing Year 12. Mum probably won’t be around for ever but it’s made our family closer supporting each other. Living in a small town, the community has been really supportive too.

At school, it helps when teachers recognise what you are achieving, not what you are lacking. I truly am doing my best to juggle everything. I am the busiest young person I know! I don’t want to give up on my family or on school, but keeping my family together is my number one thing. The school counsellor organised a meeting with my teachers, Dad and I. We were able to explain our family situation and then the teachers were much more understanding about the priorities in my life. The counsellor is always looking out for me. When we have school sports carnivals or other extra activities, the counsellor gives me permission to do my school work or to leave early so I can look after my family.

It was hard when I needed to sit my Year 11 exams, as Mum had an appointment with a specialist in Melbourne at the same time. Mum had been waiting months for this appointment as there are no specialists in Tassie. Mum needed me to go with her to help her get on and off the plane and into taxis and with getting dressed. It was really good that the School Principal stood up for me.
I think that one of my students may be a young carer –

Who do I contact for information and support?

Speak to your local Carers Association: Phone 1800 242 636

Or visit the young carer website: www.youngcarers.net.au

My name’s Paul,
I’m 15 and I’ve been caring for my Dad all my life.

I do the shopping, cooking, housework, and lots of monitoring of Dad. He has severe depression and social anxiety. Mum doesn’t live with us so it’s up to me to look after Dad. Sometimes he’s great but sometimes he can’t even get out of bed and I feel like I’m the parent rather than the other way round.

It can be hard to think at school when I’m worrying about Dad. There’s one teacher at school who understands what it’s like for me as she has a brother who has mental illness. The other teachers make me feel like I’m just using my Dad as an excuse to get out of school. I really like learning but it’s stressful trying to care for Dad and keep up with school. It would help if I got some marks for the homework I attempt or if teachers scaled back the assignments to focus on key areas. Often I can manage to do some of the assignment or homework tasks.

The school found out about me being a young carer when Dad had to go to hospital a while back, and the school counsellor put me in touch with the young carer program. They help me with transport so now when Dad’s unwell I can still go to footy practice. I don’t tell the other kids about my Dad - they don’t get it. They just think he’s weird. I wish schools had education about mental illness like they do about skin cancer and alcohol - then the other kids might understand what I do.

The young carer stories in this booklet were gathered through interview with 25 young carers living in rural and remote Australia. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of young carers and their families. Thanks go to the following people for assistance with photography and review of the booklet: Staff and students of Nuriootpa High School and Whyalla High School; John Murray, Lindaw Newham, Tash Unglaube; Dr Bindi MacGill.