

**Young Carers in School**

**A guide for education practitioners to identify and support young**

**carers**

**in schools**

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# Introduction

This guide is designed to help education practitioners understand how to identify young carers and how to implement targeted services within schools to support them. It will also aim to give an overview of the needs of young carers and different referral pathways that exist in the borough, including when an assessment and plan of support would be beneficial to the child and family.

The recommendations from this document will be tangible steps which schools can take to increase their ability to engage young carers and improve outcomes for children and young people in your school.

## What is a young carer?

A young carer is a person aged 18 or under who cares, unpaid, for a friend or family member. This can include, but is not limited to a person with:

* a long-term illness or condition
* a physical or learning disability
* a substance misuse condition
* a mental health condition

The support provided by a child or young person can vary based on the condition of the person they are caring for, but typically young carers provide a combination of *personal* (such as helping to dress or bath them), *practical* (such as cooking, cleaning and shopping) and *emotional care* (such as talking through their concerns with them).

Of course, it is normal for any child to help around the house at times, especially as they get older. However, if this support is continually relied on and begins to impact on a child or young person’s mental well-being, socialisation or education then professionals need to consider whether these responsibilities are suitable. The following quote from a Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) report outlines this further:

‘They carry out, on a regular basis, significant or substantial tasks, taking on a level of responsibility that is inappropriate to their age or development.’ (SCIE, 2005)

## What are some of the impacts of caring?

Caring can be a positive experience for a child/young person, particularly due to the soft skills they may develop and the relationships they form with the cared-for person. However, with increased responsibilities can come additional pressures. These impacts can be extremely varied and the severity on them depends on the support given to young carers in a variety of environments, including schools. Below are some key impacts that professionals should be on the lookout for.

A key area of a child/young person’s life which may be impacted by caring is their education. As a result of their caring responsibilities, many young carers may regularly turn up late to school or miss it all together. In fact, research has found that 27% of young carers have missed school or experienced educational difficulties with this number rising to 40% when a child/young person is caring for someone with drug or alcohol problems (Dearden and Becker, Young Carers in the UK: the 2004 report, 2004). When they do turn up, many young carers may struggle to focus and present as preoccupied due to concerns for the cared for person. These figures are hugely concerning and obviously point to an inequality in access to education for young carers. This is highlighted in a Children’s Society paper, Hidden from View: The experience of young carers in England (2013), which found that on average young carers are likely to have significantly lower educational attainment at GCSE level. This imbalance in education means young carers may receive grades which are nine grades lower than their peers. Due to this they are much less likely to go on to higher or further education. The Carers Trust’s report [‘Caring and Classes: the education gap for young carers’](https://carers.org/downloads/young-carers-in-education-reportfinal.pdf) (2024) has identified the following concerns:

* Young carers are missing on average 23 days of school every year – that’s more than a month in total.
* Almost half of young carers at secondary school are ‘persistently absent’.
* Only 46% of teachers think their school provides the support young carers need, while 23% of young carers say they get no support at all.

Caring can also be an isolating experience for children and young people, particularly if they have more significant responsibilities at home. For young carers, developing and maintaining friendship is not as simple as it is for their peers. Often, they are unable to participate in activities after school and they may struggle to invite people back to their home due to stigma around caring. Research into this has found that 23% of young carers felt that their caring role had, on at least one occasion, prevented them from making friends (YouGov, A Forgotten Army: Coping as a Carer, 2019). Consequently, young carers are more likely to be lonely than their peers and are unfortunately more likely to be targeted for bullying. In fact, 16% of young carers aged 11-17 years reported being bullied compared with 3% of 11-17-year-olds who were not young carers (Aldridge, et al, 2017).A further study found that 68% young carers questioned had been bullied at school (Princess Royal Trust for Carers, 2010a). This of course has a huge impact on young carers’ isolation and points to more intervention being necessary at the school level to challenge the stigma that leads to bullying. Later in this document we will look at some recommendations to help address this need.

We must also consider the burden of having additional concerns placed on them at all times. Young carers often report that they struggle to make time for themselves and that they don’t want to worry their family or social network with how they feel (Young Carers Wellbeing, The Children’s Society, 2018). Consequently, children/young people struggle to focus on their own socialisation and wellbeing as they prioritise the needs of the cared-for over their own. This internalisation of their worries can have ongoing detrimental impacts for the children/young people. A study by Rethink Mental Illness found that 60% of young carers they interviewed felt that caring significantly impacted their mental health. These mental health impacts may manifest themselves in many different ways including stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, eating/sleeping problems and self-harm. It is therefore important that a young carer has professionals they can speak to about their challenges at home so they can share some of this burden.

Of course, as previously mentioned the extent of the impacts on a child/young person vary based on several factors including total hours of care provided, type of care provided, whether there are other people (including care workers or other family members) helping to provide the care and the age of the child/young person. This is why it is really important that any assessments conducted by the local authority or schools consider whether the amount of care that a child/young person is providing is age appropriate. At this point, it is important to reiterate that caring does not necessarily have to be a bad experience for children/young people. In fact, young carers can benefit from developing emotional maturity and stronger relationships with the cared for. However, given their increased responsibilities, young carers deserve additional support from their local authority.

## How many young carers are in Tower Hamlets?

Estimating the number of young carers both nationally and locally is a challenge for a myriad of reasons. Firstly, we often rely on population census data which only reaches professionals years after it’s first collected. Secondly, this data relies on children/young people and families having to self-report that they have a caring role and there are many barriers that may prevent that from happening. This means that there is a clear gap between official identification and the true statistic of young carers in the country. For example, the last census documented that there are ***166,000*** young carers in the UK; however, estimations from charities such as The Children’s Society and Carers Trust place the true figure at around ***700,000.*** If we take these figures at face value this means that across the UK as many as **1 in 5** children and young people are young carers. When we break it down by age range this could equate to at least **1 in 12** secondary school aged children being young carers, or **2 in every class**. All of this points to the fact that professionals around the children need to be able to identify signs of caring in children/young people to ensure they are accessing the right support.

At a local level, the total number of young carers in the borough is not known but data from the 2021 census stated that there were over 500 young carers under the age of 18. Once again, this is likely to be an underestimation as the official statistics simply aren’t capable of capturing all young carers and many, many families will not see their children as carers. When we consider the local context the factors that may prevent identification are varied and can include stigma, cultural barriers, a lack of understanding of caring and a fear of social services. The issue of stigma is particularly prevalent in Tower Hamlets due to the extremely high levels of young carers who are caring for a parent with a mental illness. The young carers that the Local Authority is aware of are predominantly referred through social services or Early Help and are therefore children who are already known to the system. This means that there are hidden young carers who are most vulnerable and in need of support. This is why it is so important for schools to have measures in place to identify and in partnership support young carers at an early stage to prevent them and their families from reaching crisis whereby their health and well-being may be seriously impaired or at risk of harm.

## What is the role of the Local Authority?

As with any vulnerable group, the Local Authority has specific obligations to ensure that their needs are met and that they are equally able to access vital support and services. These responsibilities have been made even more clear with the introduction of the **Children and Families Act (2014)** andthe **Care Act (2014)** which both outlined that the authority must offer a young carer’s needs assessment to any young carer they identify or any young carer who reaches out for an assessment. This assessment must consider not only the needs of the cared-for person, but also take a whole-family approach which centres around the child’s wishes and needs. This assessment should seek to identify whether the child/young person is taking on either excessive or inappropriate care, and measures should be put into place to ensure that further support is put in place to prevent any negative impacts on the child/young person.

In summary, these two legislations encourage a whole system approach to looking after young carers, meaning not only should different statutory departments within a local authority work together to support young carers but other services around the child need to be included in this too. Therefore, whilst it is the local authority which is required to provide assessments and run specific support services for young carers, there is plenty that can also be done by schools to advocate for young carers. This will be explored further in the recommendations section.

# Identifying young carers

Given all of the potential negative ramifications we have discussed earlier in this document, it is clear that early identification is crucial to ensuring that young carers have the adequate support in place to help them thrive. In order for this identification to happen, all professionals in health, education and social care need to be aware of some potential warning signs of care. Here are five key signs for you to be aware of:

###  Mood

As we mentioned in the impacts section, young carers are often emotionally impacted by the care that they provide which leads to significant changes in their moods. One of these changes may be that they begin to present as subdued or quiet more frequently. This may include withdrawing from socialising, turning up to school tired or visibly anxious or less engaged in classroom discussions. Alternatively, the child may present as angry or frustrated and lash out in class due to the pressures they are experiencing at home. As with any child, it is important that you actively identify significant mood changes and remain approachable, so they feel comfortable sharing any changes in family circumstances with you.

###  Engagement at school

Unfortunately, having a caring role is likely to impact a child/young person’s experience of education. We’ve already discussed the impact that caring can have on a child/young person’s final educational attainment; however, there are signs that teachers can pick up on at an earlier stage to help prevent any disparity in their grades compared to their peers. For example, you might notice that a child/young person has a habit of frequently turning up late to school or missing it altogether. One reason why a child/young person may be turning up late is that they may be responsible for taking younger siblings to schools before they are able to go themselves. When they are in the classroom, they may seem distracted or behave as though they are not paying attention. Young carers are often preoccupied by thought of the person they are caring for at home. If you notice these warning signs, organise a meeting between the child/young person and your pastoral team to see whether they may need additional support.

###  Friendships

Another key area where you may be able to see some warning signs of caring is in a child/young person’s socialisation. Some young carers struggle to make and maintain friendships as a result of their additional responsibilities at home. As a result of the stigma of caring, the children/young people may present as isolated from their peers and they may be bullied for their lack of engagement. This can lead to low self-esteem and low self-confidence which can prevent them from trying to engage in any additional activities. As a result of all of this they may seem mature for their age and feel more comfortable speaking to adults than their peers. Schools may need to consider creating specific social groups for young carers in school to make sure they are able to interact with peers who understand their caring role.

###  Parents/Guardians

When identifying a young carer, you must also consider their wider family network. If you notice that you haven’t seen or heard from a child/young person’s parent lately on top of other signs listed above, then it would be worth reaching out to make sure they are coping at home. This is especially important if you are already aware that a parent, sibling or another family member has a need that requires additional care. When you do see the parent, make sure you watch out for signs that they are struggling to meet their children’s needs, or their own. Always try to speak to the parents or guardians to discuss challenges they may be facing and be prepared to refer onto additional services who can support.

###  Sudden changes in behaviour

Any sudden changes in behaviour are a cause for concern in a child/young person. If a child suddenly has difficulties joining in on extra-curricular activities and is secretive about their home life when asked, then they may be experiencing additional pressures at home. This would be a good time to sit down with the child/young person and speak to them about whether anything has changed for them at home which is affecting their schooling. Young carers are also a very vulnerable group and are therefore at a higher risk of exploitation, so it is paramount that professionals actively identify any warning signs of child sexual exploitation (CSE) or child criminal exploitation (CCE) as quickly as possible. It is important that you reassure them at this stage that they are not in trouble, and you are only seeking to help.

It may be helpful for school professionals to make use of the **Tower Hamlets Young Carers Partnership Identification Tool** when having conversations with children and young people about their caring responsibilities.

# Recommendations for schools

There are lots of different things you can implement in your school to make it more inclusive for young carers. Below is a short list of recommendations for you to take to your schools.

## Young Carers in School Award

One great thing that schools can work towards is the [Young Carers in School](https://youngcarersinschools.com/what-is-the-award/) (YCiS) Award. The YCiS programme is a free initiative that is jointly run by The Carers Trust and The Children’s Society which is designed to encourage school to take steps to support young carers and award good practice for those who achieve this. The award has been co-designed with young carers and is separated into two levels: Young Carers and Young Carers Plus. Each award is built on 5 key standards which must be evidenced when applying for an award.

By participating in the YCiS programme you will gain national recognition for raising outcomes for young carers and will be listed on the virtual map of all schools who have successfully received an award. You will also be supported to identify manageable steps to continue to improve outcomes for young carers within your schools. This is bolstered by access to additional support, including templates, webinars and professional development events.

Your school can enrol in the programme at any time by visiting <https://youngcarersinschools.com/what-is-the-award/>. You can email YCiS@childrenssociety.org.uk for further information.

## Awareness raising campaigns

We would recommend that you participate in school-wide assemblies to encourage children/young people to look out for signs of caring in themselves and their wider community. By taking a whole-school approach to identifying young carers, you create an environment where children and young people will feel less shame and stigma around their responsibilities and may feel more comfortable reaching out for support. Assemblies can tackle what being a carer actually means, breaking down myths around disabilities and mental health, and developing empathy towards other students. These assemblies should be used to raise awareness, encourage self-identification and nurture positive conversations around disabilities and illnesses and can run alongside PSHE lessons to further these conversations. These can and should happen throughout the year but a key date you should consider launching a campaign around is **Young Carers Action Day** which takes place every March: <https://carers.org/young-carers-action-day/>

A big barrier for children and young people self-identifying is simply not understanding the language around caring. By breaking it down in clear ways and ensuring that children and young people understand who to reach out to if they are concerned, you will prevent more young carers slipping through the gaps. Alongside school-wide assemblies, you can post information on virtual and school-based bulletin boards, send home information to parents and ensure that children/young people can access information discretely and easily. There are a wide range of books which include Young Carers as a theme, and which may support self-identification among pupils. It is important that these books contain signposting information so that pupils know that they can be supported in the first instance by the school’s pastoral team. Lists of books are available via the [Book Trust](https://www.booktrust.org.uk/booklists/y/young-carers/) and the [Young Carers Alliance](https://carers.org/young-carers-alliance/young-carers-alliance-resources). The Tower Hamlets Schools Library Service can support with the supply of relevant books.

Materials to support you on developing and implementing a whole school approach to supporting Young Carers is available on the Young Carers website at <https://youngcarersinschools.com> Resources include videos, powerpoints, lesson plans and posters.

## Young carers support groups in schools

For many young carers, having the opportunity to talk with peers who are experiencing similar challenges can be very freeing and can help boost their self-esteem. Running regular sessions during lunch breaks in school can remind young carers that they are not alone and that there are people around them who understand. It can also help them nurture new friendships with children/young people who will not be frustrated if they are unable to do things outside of school. During these sessions, you can invite the young carers to talk about their experiences at home and remind them that anything they say in the group is confidential. They may also choose to use this group as a chance to socialise, catch-up on their studies or to check in with the cared-for at home, allow them to use the space in the way which suits them best.

The young carers attending the support group should also be involved in co-designing any future strategies for young carers in the school. The children/young people’s lived experience of facing challenges in school should guide your practice going forward and any strategies suggested by SLT should be run past them. If the children/young people are interested in this, consider creating a young carers forum where they have a chance to work directly with leadership and feedback their experiences. Through this forum they could be involved in the creation of information flyers for bulletin boards or content for assemblies as an example.

## Dedicated pastoral support

It often works well to have a specific pastoral lead for young carers within a school to ensure that young carers feel comfortable that they will be able to discuss their concerns with someone who really understands. The DSL or Deputy DSL should be responsible for developing a meaningful day-to-day strategy or you may elect to have one key lead per year group such as the head of year who can feedback to the safeguarding leadership team regularly. For some schools, establishing a working group with these key leads is the best way of ensuring that the day-to-day support is managed effectively. These leads should be responsible for keeping an eye on identified young carers and ensuring they have specific support to help them reach their potential. This will include monitoring their attendance, seeing if they are keeping up with their targets and having regular check-ins about their wellbeing. This will be similar to interventions you will have in place for other protected groups.

In line with this monitoring, it is a good idea to establish a personal development plan for all young carers with specific support put in place to help them achieve their goals. This could include a homework club, participating in the young carers group at school or external referrals with the child/young person’s consent. This will also be a space where the child/young person can express any concerns, they may have such as missing school or struggling to complete homework. This will of course need to be re-assessed at regular intervals or after the child/young person has reported a significant change in their home situation.

This pastoral support will be particularly important in transition years as young carers may need extra support to ensure they do not suffer any negative ramifications with changes in schools. Feedback from young carers suggests that the transition to different schools or into different year groups is a time of increased anxiety for children/young people as they fear they will be lost in a sea of faces. Certain information may need to be shared during each transition, with the child/young person’s consent, to ensure that staff around the young carer understand their needs.

## Working with parents

You should consider how to make extra-curricular school events or parents’ evenings accessible for the families of young carers. They may struggle to attend these events due to a parent/guardian having a disability or if they are caring for someone intensively. Look into other avenues for engaging these families or if there is a way to help them travel to and from these events.

## Completing the DfE School Census Return

All schools (except nursery) are asked to supply information about Young Carers in the Spring Census Return (January). The young carer indicator identifies, for those children on roll on spring census day, whether they have been identified as a young carer and if so, by whom.

It is important that the Young Carers section in the census return is completed correctly to improve formal identification of this cohort in schools, understand their needs and to provide early help as outlined in the statutory guidance, [Keeping children safe in education](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2). In the past census, many schools in Tower Hamlets did not report any Young Carers. Designated Safeguarding Leads should work closely with the person responsible for submitting the data to ensure that an accurate count is given.

You do not need to get parental or pupil consent to the provision of information for the purposes of the census, but schools should respect the wishes and feelings of both child/young people and their parents.

Schools record the information using the following codes. Only one of the values will apply to each pupil.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Code | Young carer indicator |
| N | Not declared (this is the default code)  |
| P | Identified as a young carer by parent or guardian |
| S | Identified as a young carer by school – including where the pupil self-declares |

# Referral pathways in Tower Hamlets

##  Young Carer’s Assessment

If you feel that the child or young person or a member of their family requires more support than the school alone can provide, the DSL/Deputy DSL should refer to the [Tower Hamlets Multi-Agency Support Team](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/health__social_care/children_and_family_care/Multi-Agency-Support-Team-MAST.aspx) (MAST), who will arrange for a Young Carers Assessment to be undertaken. This assessment can help to identify what additional support can be provided from other services including housing and adult social care.

Schools should complete the **Tower Hamlets Young Carers Identification Form** and attach it to the MAST referral form.

Depending upon the age and needs of the child, a professional from Tower Hamlets Early Help & Children and Family Service (up to 11), Targeted Youth Support (11-18) or Children’s Social Care will undertake a Young Carer’s Assessment and work with the professional network, including schools, to develop a plan.

# Young Carers Services in Tower Hamlets

**Young Tower Hamlets**

Young Tower Hamlets offers respite youth work for young carers aged 8-18 either living or studying in Tower Hamlets.

With so many adult responsibilities, young carers often miss out on opportunities that other children have to play and learn. The project aims to give young carers the opportunity to take a break from these daily responsibilities by giving them the chance to interact with others facing similar challenges and to take part in fun activities. The main way this is achieved is through access to weekly respite sessions, activities taking place in the school holidays, access to residential breaks and days out, as well as individual one-to-one support if required. The weekly sessions are arranged by age group with separate sessions for 8-12-year-olds and 13-18-year-olds. The young carers are supported to develop their self-esteem and self-confidence through group-based activities and one-to-one support from staff at the sessions. These weekly sessions are planned with the children and young people and varies depending on their wishes. As a result, the group activities are diverse, including arts and crafts, film making, baking, biking, climbing, and trips to places such as escape rooms. Through ongoing consultations with the young carers, programmes are developed that meet their needs.

To get more information on the project, or to request a referral form please contact us on young.carers@towerhamlets.gov.uk

## 1:1 Support via Streets of Growth

Streets of Growth provides a Caring and Coping Services which aims to offer children and young people and their families tailored, holistic support through 1:1 support for children and young people and additional whole-family work to help break down the barriers for unidentified young carers.

To get more information on this programme or to receive the referral form please email mail@streetsofgrowth.org

## Renaissance Foundation

Another service that can be accessed for young carers aged 13-18 in the borough is a programme run by the charity, Renaissance Foundation. They inspire young people facing various serious challenges to fulfil their unique potential. This is achieved through a three-year bespoke programme focused onstrengthening young people’s resilience, developing their soft skills, and raising their ambitions. The programme includes team building workshops, trips to famous locations in London and beyond, participation in social action projects and their annual trip to the Nobel Peace Prize.

To find out more about the programme and to discuss any referrals please email info@renaissance-foundation.com

## Transition to Adulthood pathway

We are lucky in the borough that we have a well-resourced offer available to adult carers run by the Carers Centre. As part of their offer, they also provide transitional support to young adult carers (16-25) to ensure that they do not fall off the map after leaving children’s services. They provide a weekly informal social group for carers to meet and make friends, as well as monthly information sessions on topics like mental health, healthy eating, relationships and personal development.

To find out more and to get a young person involved, please email the key worker Ben on benjamin@ccth.org.uk or call 07869 387 665.

# Other useful resources

Children’s Society factsheet on parental mental illness

Children’s Society factsheet on involving young carers

Children’s Society factsheet on young carers and schools

Children’s Society factsheet on young carers from BAME families

Children’s Society factsheet on young carers of parents who misuse substances

Children’s Society factsheet on young carers wellbeing

Children’s Society, Hidden from View: The Experiences of Young Carers in England

SCIE guidance on young carers

Carers Trust, Young Carers in Schools: Guidance for schools COVID-19 recovery

Carers Trust, My Future, My Feelings, My Family: The Impact of Coronavirus

Carers Trust, Training resources to help improve identification

ME WE Consortium, Enabling young carers to pursue their goals in life and reach their full potential

Carers Trust and NatCen, Identification Practice of Young Carers in England