



[www.parentalmentalillness.org](http://www.parentalmentalillness.org)

## **Young Carers of Parents with Mental Illness Tip Sheet for Service Providers**

### **What are “young carers”?**

**Young carers are children** and young people under 19 **who provide**, or intend to provide, **personal care, assistance or support to another family member with an illness or disability on a regular basis**. Their relative may be a **parent**, grandparent, sometimes a sibling or occasionally a friend. Their family member’s disabilities may be physical, sensory, emotional or learning impairment, long-term illness, HIV, drug or alcohol dependence or **mental health problems**.

In many families, children contribute to family care and well-being as a part of normal family life. A young carer is a child who is responsible for primary or secondary caring that may include carrying out significant or substantial caring tasks and assuming a level of responsibility that would normally be expected of an adult. Caring tasks can involve physical or emotional care, or taking responsibility for someone’s safety or well being.

Children of parents with mental illness often care for younger siblings in the home, perform many adult housekeeping tasks and sometimes feel responsible for symptom or medication monitoring, as well as “suicide watch” of their parents when they are ill. They are often referred to as “invisible children” because their external competency hides their missing emotional needs from adults who give them praise for their "responsible" behaviour.

**Caring responsibilities can significantly impact upon a child’s health and development.**

The impact of taking on an inappropriate caring role can include underachievement or absenteeism at school, or mental or physical ill health. Some young carers may gain strength and self-esteem from the experience of caring. Young carers often develop strong family bonds and become more sensitive to the difficulties other people go through. But it's not just the caring that can be challenging. There are other things like feeling isolated and sometimes not having enough money in the family.

### **Young carers may experience:**

- Social isolation from other children of the same age and from other family members
- Feeling that they are different from other children and unable to be part of a group;
- Impaired development of their identity and potential;

- Low self-esteem;
- Emotional and physical neglect;
- Conflict between loyalty to their family, the needs of the person they are helping and their wish to have their own needs met, leading to feelings of guilt and resentment;
- Feeling that there is nobody there for them or no one else understands their experience, that professionals do not listen to them and are working only with the adult;
- Lack of time for play, sport or leisure activities;
- A low level of school attendance;
- Lack of recognition, praise, or respect for their contribution;
- Problems moving into adulthood especially with finding work, their own home, and establishing relationships.

Professionals in agencies serving adults or children are often the first to become aware of a young person who is a carer. Where a young carer is identified, professionals should consider the child's support needs.

The first aim of adults' and children's services should be to ensure that people with disabilities do not have to rely on the inappropriate caring role of a child. Until this is achieved, support should be given to young carers and their families to **reduce the impact of the caring role on the child.**

While the welfare of the child is always paramount<sup>i</sup>, all children benefit from having well-**supported parents**. In carrying out a referral or assessment staff should adopt a whole-family approach that supports both adults who have care needs with their parenting role and the children who care for them.

### What are young carers needs?

- ✓ **Recognition** of their role;
- ✓ **Support with caring tasks**. This is especially important so that they can attend school, do their homework, have time to be with their friends and pursue their own hobbies & interests;
- ✓ **Information** about the support available to them and what to do in a crisis;
- ✓ **Emotional support**, and especially someone who they can talk to about their feelings;
- ✓ **Education** about their parent's illness and **stress management skills** to help them cope.

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<sup>i</sup> The Children Act 1989 (UK)

We wish to acknowledge that much of the information in this tip sheet is a compilation of excerpts from the UK- NATIONAL CARERS STRATEGY *Caring about Carers* DH 1999 and thank them for their leadership work.

**For more information on resources to support young carers, please visit these websites:**

<http://www.parentalmentalillness.org>

<http://www.youngcarers.ca/tor.html>

<http://www.youngcarers.net>

[http://www.swlstg-tr.nhs.uk/service\\_users/young\\_carers.asp](http://www.swlstg-tr.nhs.uk/service_users/young_carers.asp)