



Unearthing treasure

Finding and facing the truth about young carers

Written by Mark Chester, Space2think

“Young carers aren’t going to go to an office in school to report that they are young carers”, says Aphra Lewin, team leader of YMCA Sutton Coldfield’s RELEASE project. “You wouldn’t go to a teacher who has recently told you off or given you a bad grade.”

It is a sentiment shared by Sean Jordan, the Youth and Wellbeing Worker at Greenwood Academy: “A young person would prefer to tell people that they’re gay than admit to being a young carer,” he says. “We’re getting better at being open about gender and sexual orientation, but young caring is still a taboo.”

These assertions are backed up by YMCA Sutton Coldfield’s own research. In November 2017 the RELEASE Team, specialists in young carer support, distributed questionnaires within two secondary schools and received 1600 responses. 433 respondents were identified as young carers. Of these, 103 reported that friends were aware of their caring role. Only 17 said that their school knew. Many young carers are living with a secret that they will go to great lengths not to tell, especially in school.

We’re careful who we tell

I sit in a room with five young carers who have gathered for their weekly support session with Lauren Lander, one of the RELEASE team workers, and as they start to open up to me about the challenges of being young carers I hear the evidence of the point made by Aphra and Sean. “Teachers tell one another,” says Chloe, “and I’d be bothered if teachers knew. I wouldn’t want teachers talking about my information without telling me.”

“We’re careful who we tell,” says Tom. “I don’t want the label of ‘young carer’.”

Aphra has many years experience of working with young carers, and she is not surprised by the findings of their research. “Young carers don’t believe the school will do anything. They also like to separate home life from school because they find it easier to deal with. They are worried that they’ll be picked on or bullied, which may not be the actuality. But many young carers are introverts, internalising everything, and are constantly worried about what others may think.”

Aphra identifies another source of pressure to keep it quiet. “Families can be hesitant because of the repercussions of saying my son or daughter has to administer medicine five times a week. Denial and guilt make parents less likely to disclose what’s going on unless they hit a crisis. It’s a need to know.”

The young carers I’m with are clearly enjoying their time with Lauren and are being very open with her; getting a word in edgeways is a challenge for the quieter members of the group. Connor tells me that, “Lauren is a really friendly person and we can have a laugh with her, but we can also talk

to her about what is going on.” So why are they content to talk with Lauren and not with their teachers?

Labels that are tough to shake off

Emma was one of the more challenging young carers RELEASE have worked with. She cared for her brother, who had autism, but as she got older she became very embarrassed by his behaviour and didn't want to be seen with him because it drew attention to her - except at the YMCA where young people with additional needs are a normal part of their community. Emma didn't like people telling her what to do and lashed out if she felt overpowered by authority. She didn't react well when she felt teachers were asserting their dominance over her and her reputation soon went before her; a new maths teacher made her sit away from her friends to avoid any trouble. But at the YMCA she was treated differently. She refused to speak to anyone the first time she went, but the RELEASE team were patient; past experience has taught them that you have to be in it for the long haul if you really want to help. They asked Emma lots of questions about herself - not about her brother - and they found out different things she liked to do. They gave her choices and bit by bit she thawed. She went with the RELEASE team on a residential trip and eventually became a leader and volunteer with younger children.

“We're youth workers first and foremost,” says Aphra. “We engage with the young person and that gives us a route to support the whole family. Whereas the only reason the school got to know Emma was a young carer was because her behaviour prompted a common assessment framework to be put in place.”

It is a familiar story. A young person is looking after his or her mum or dad or sibling, but nobody knows. The responsibility is great and not telling anyone is a strain. The young person misses handing in some homework assignments, arrives late on several occasions, has an angry outburst and they find themselves on a fast track to the school's Support Unit. It's not intended to be for those only with behavioural issues but that is what it is by reputation, so no young person is going to knock on the door and spill the beans on their secret life as a carer. They don't want to be seen at the Support Unit; the stigma is too great. The root of the wrongdoing emerges eventually but by then the die has been cast. Like with Emma, the young person has attracted labels like 'aggressive' and 'disruptive', and they are tough to shake off.

If we're answerable for it, we will do it

Jenny Smallman, a family support worker at North Birmingham Academy says candidly, “We wouldn't get to know those young carers who don't have a presenting problem. The Head of Year referred somebody who was scruffily dressed and had poor attendance, and in conversation we discovered he was a young carer. Just yesterday, I was talking to a lad; he was late for school because he needed to help his mum and then wait for his aunt to arrive before he could leave for school.”

Jenny feels that the school definitely needs external support if they are to help more young carers. “We have to work with resources out there to give these kids the level of service they deserve, and if everyone in school can do a bit it makes it so much easier.”

She is in no doubt that awareness raising is crucial. “I can't be everywhere. Awareness raising would help identify young carers and bring them to us. Teachers are so focused on teaching they can be forgiven for not thinking about pressures on pupils. What's needed is planting a seed in their heads so they will consider what could be behind the presenting problem.”

Jenny suggests having outside agencies, such as the RELEASE team, at parents evenings and other school events, so that support for young carers and their families becomes part and parcel of what school is. But she is also a realist and knows that supporting young carers will not get the priority it deserves unless schools are made accountable for it. “I'm conscious that I need to put young carers on my timetable to keep the momentum going, otherwise weeks and months pass before I think about young carers. We should have some data that we keep on young carers, like we do with other priority areas, such as pupil premium kids. I'd like to have that information in front

of me. If we're answerable for it, we will do it, but given a choice we'll probably put it off. We're only human."

It is something Aphra and Lauren have identified too, and when I ask them what needs to change they say that there should be a school standard for supporting young carers - one that is tested by OFSTED.

Boys are not supposed to cry

Meanwhile, the young carers who are meeting with Lauren get sidetracked from my questions into a conversation about identifying other students at the school who could be young carers in need of support. It's especially touching to hear the concern they have for others who may be isolated and alone, and they are keen to offer them the chance to get involved in the support group. The emotional intelligence and empathy in a room of supposedly yet to mature teenagers is palpable and I get a fresh insight into how natural it is for them to care. They do it instinctively.

Is it harder for boys or for girls to be a young carer, I wonder? "For boys," says Tom. "If you're a boy you're supposed to be a man and not supposed to cry."

Isabel disagrees: "I think it's harder for girls because we get more emotional."

Of the girls who completed the RELEASE team's questionnaire, 33% identified themselves as young carers. A smaller proportion of boys - 22% - said they had a caring role. Are there more girls caring than boys? Or are boys more hesitant to admit to their caring roles? Jenny Smallman believes boys are more reticent: "Boys are less likely to talk and access support. I don't know if it's a case of 'I don't want people to know my business' or 'I don't want people to think I'm weak', but the more we talk about it in school the less stigma there will be."

Catch-22

I ask the young carers how they think their school could help them, and they all chip in with ideas:

"We'd like the school to raise awareness so everybody understands young carers."

"We'd like to campaign."

"We'd like the school to do something for Young Carers Week and get the whole school involved."

"Young carers don't get recognition."

"The homework scheme doesn't work for us. It puts stress on us."

The conversation so far seems to reveal that they would like other people at school - pupils and teachers - to know about young carers, even if they don't want to be identified as such themselves. But I wonder whether they would be more at ease with being recognised as young carers if the whole subject was out in the open a bit more. Perhaps it's a case of catch-22 for them; they would like to raise awareness so that they can be more confident of being accepted but they don't want people to know they are young carers until they can be assured there will be no stigma attached. It leaves them in a difficult position; covert caring must lead to stockpiles of frustration, I think.

Aphra confirms this: "Younger ones might not quite understand that mum or dad is going to be ill forever, but teenagers start to clock that this will be what it's like for the rest of their lives. At this point they decide whether to accept this and go with it or start to rebel. Others get angry or are in denial."

Finding priceless gems

Connor speaks to me aside from the group, who have now begun to play cards together, and he tells me, "It becomes frustrating sometimes. Sometimes I blame myself. Last night my mum had a blackout and slept for hours. I felt it was somehow my fault, but it also makes me feel like I am doing something good. Sometimes I come to school and think of it as a break, hanging out with friends, but I always worry about mum and dad when I'm at school."

We rejoin Connor's fellow carers for a spot of 'hanging out' and playing cards. They're playing 'Cheat' a game in which you must conceal the true identity of the cards you've been dealt, and it seems to be a metaphor for the lives these remarkable young people are leading.

I'm left with the impression that society must learn to face up to the truth about young carers so that they can feel safe to reveal their true identities. There are many hidden young carers - unearthed treasure - out there who need acknowledgement and help, and the RELEASE team is doing its best to excavate them, polish them and cherish them, like the priceless gems they are. One day these young carers will feel safe enough to allow their schools and friends and fellow pupils to see what their lives are really like and then maybe they will feel more confident, more secure, more supported in their vital roles. Perhaps we all have a part to play in making this happen.

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