

## Young Carers in a time of COVID

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Two weeks into my new role as a Young Carer Development Worker, I did not picture myself typing away at my home computer in my dressing gown and hiking socks. I expected to be 'hitting the ground running' and really getting to grips with the dynamic, face-to-face work that Edinburgh Young Carers (EYC) delivers. Like many others in our field, I feel at a bit of a loss and helpless trying to fulfil the role that I love during this period of social isolation. This time of fear, uncertainty and frustration has brought huge challenges for services, workers and communities. Perhaps most starkly for those individuals and families who are already struggling.

As a new member of the team, I am in no way an authority on the issues that affect young carers. However, luckily for myself (and you the reader!), I am working with a team full of experts who have been kind enough to highlight the issues impacting on EYC's children and young people in these, to use the stock phrase of 2020, 'unprecedented times'.

Young carers can be defined as young people who care for, or are impacted by, someone at home who has a disability, chronic health condition, mental ill health or drug/alcohol use problem. Whether that be a parent, guardian or sibling(s). Edinburgh Young Carers work with young people from the age of 5-25 and support them by providing respite (through groups, day trips and residential), practical and emotional support through 1:1 work and specialist groups, counselling and general awareness raising, and support for schools and other professionals. The work that EYC does allows young carers to be children first and gives them a much needed break to play, learn and connect with others. During this period of global pandemic, I have observed the organisation adapt, diversify and continue to offer support, albeit in a new socially-distanced format. I will speak of their solutions later on, but first will explore some of the key challenges of being a young carer in the time of COVID-19.

The first challenge is the huge increase in anxiety that this pandemic has created, which I am sure many of us will relate to. Young carers feel this acutely, as not only does the virus have a potentially catastrophic impact on the loved one they are caring for but, should they themselves fall ill, they would be unable to fulfil their role as carer. This is a tremendous weight of responsibility to carry, and many of our young carers have reported their fears of passing the virus on to family members as they are undertaking the majority of the shopping and trips

outside. The media's portrayal heightens the anxiety, and the seemingly inevitable doom reinforces the idea no one is safe and the consequence of contracting the virus would be disastrous. Young carers already live with a significant amount of worry for their loved ones, and the impact of the current situation has been detrimental to many young carers' mental health and well-being.

In addition, young carers are a group already at risk of social isolation from friends, due to their caring responsibilities. Accordingly, social distancing including in some cases shielding, further exacerbates feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Lockdown also increases the amount of caring required due to school closures where caring roles, particularly for siblings, become full-time and without relief. Furthermore, school-attending young carers are missing those times of the day in which they are not 'on call', and the vital respite they gain from school and community groups such as those provided by EYC.

It is well-evidenced that families supported by young carers experience increased levels of financial hardship and are more likely to live in poverty. Corona virus has caused widespread economic uncertainty. When asked how they are affected, young carers accessing the service identified financial worries as a key concern. This has many dimensions, ranging from potentially not being able to access school meals, to suffering with the recent food shortages. Times are harder than ever. In addition, many of the services in place depend on technology and do not have an 'offline' alternative. This not only assumes that there is universal access to the internet and digital devices, but also requires a level of computer literacy in order to take advantage of what is available. Schools are using online software to send out school work, but this is not accessible for families without the required technology at home. Similarly, adults who may not have the requisite computer skills are not able to access grants and services that they are entitled to. Some organisations, including EYC, share information via social media and their websites. Although this is successful at reaching many of the families, it does not capture those without Wi-Fi, phone credit or suitable technology.

A significant concern for older young carers has been the impact of cancelled exams on their qualifications, and the consequence this could have for their future. Many young people feel their prelim marks were not an accurate reflection of their ability, and not having the opportunity to improve on this result has been deeply upsetting for those with hopes of going on to college/university. Young carers are often invisible within the school community and

they are already at a disadvantage educationally because of their caring role, which may lead to increased absences, less time to study, or difficulty in concentrating.

A final key challenge has been sourcing food and collecting medication. For many of EYC's young people, they will run family errands, but this has been made particularly difficult with the queuing systems in place. A trip to the shops can be lengthy and anxiety-inducing. Many local foodbanks have closed, and smaller supermarkets have a more limited range compared to those accessible by car. One young carer reported that her family were using newspaper instead of toilet paper or sanitary products, as these items were unavailable in shops within walking distance.

EYC's response to these challenges has been impressive. They have been supporting families and young people remotely through calls, text and social media. They successfully secured a grant to offer young carers tablets in order to get online, and extra technology for the most vulnerable families. They are sending out activity packs to help keep young carers occupied, setting social media challenges and using online apps to provide ongoing, engaging support. Behind the scenes, staff are coordinating food deliveries, offering food vouchers, signposting to other services and liaising with key professionals to ensure that young people are kept safe and healthy. EYC are responding to young peoples' concerns about shopping by providing 'young carer cards' which allow them to access shops during the quieter 'key worker' times. They are also offering Dynamic Youth Awards and Hi 5 awards to give young people the opportunity to work towards an accredited goal and to keep motivated. What is most apparent is that, even in week 5 of this crisis, EYC are still developing new ideas, partnerships, funding options and innovative new strategies for engagement. They recognise the ongoing barriers for young carers and are solution-focussed in addressing them. The team are resilient, positive and are forward-looking as well as acknowledging the difficulties of the present.

My hope is that through this crisis will come a renewed energy for community and connectedness. That out of struggle comes opportunity, vigour and determination. If the past few weeks have taught us anything, it is that we cannot do this alone. We all have a role in society and services like Edinburgh Young Carers and so many others, provide a lifeline that would simply not exist without them. In these extraordinary times this is an opportunity to highlight success and support the efforts of services and communities to survive.

In the words of Dr Brené Brown, 'The dark does not destroy the light; it defines it.' (2010, p82)

## **Reference**

Brown, B. (2010) *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*; Hazelden Publishing, Minnesota.