

IMPROVING SUPPORT FOR MALE YOUNG ADULT CARERS

INTRODUCTION

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is managing a programme of work to raise awareness of the challenges faced by young adult carers aged 16-25 in accessing learning and work and effective approaches to overcoming this. L&W is an independent policy and research organisation dedicated to promoting lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. We strive for a fair society in which learning and work helps people realise their ambitions and potential throughout life.

A young adult carer, aged 16-25, typically has a caring responsibility for a member or members of their immediate family, a parent or sibling and in some cases a grandparent or member of their wider family. It is very common that this caring responsibility has a negative impact on their access to and engagement with learning, often resulting in lateness, absence and lack of concentration due to stress and anxiety. Many young adult carers tell us that they have experienced bullying and that there is a stigma attached to being a carer. However, the responsibility of caring also provides opportunities for young adult carers to mature early and gain a range of skills, such as budgeting, managing a household and good communication skills, that their peers of the same age might not have.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEFING PAPER?

Young adult carers have told L&W that being a male young adult carer can present additional challenges. The purpose of this briefing paper is to identify and raise awareness of the additional challenges faced by young adult carers in accessing and engaging with learning, as a result of being male. Like the majority of young adult carers we have spoken to, male young adult carers are very proud of the work they do and the skills that they gain as carers, but are also aware of the challenges presented by being a young man who cares. The following case studies of Ross, Joseph and Ben¹, illustrate these challenges within the context of their caring responsibilities.

CASE STUDIES

Ross

“It annoyed me that a lot of people thought I would end up in prison, that I’d be on benefits. That actually drove me; I thought ‘I’m going to make something of myself and people are going to think: actually, he did alright’.”

Ross has been caring for his mum all of his life. She has mental health difficulties. Ross always had good attendance at school and did his work on time. However, he felt that his school singled him out because of his situation. They never spoke to Ross about the kinds of help he wanted, simply made assumptions and provided generic support that didn’t address his needs.

¹ All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Ross left school at 16 and went on to do a BTEC in IT at college. College was a much more positive experience for Ross compared to school. The tutors were more relaxed and, although the college offered him support, this wasn't forced on him like it had been in school. After college, Ross progressed to university to study IT. Once Ross had finished his degree, he decided that he wanted to work in social care and he gained a one-year Apprenticeship in the care sector. Upon completion of his Apprenticeship, Ross successfully applied for a support worker position at a day service.

Ross is now a Care Service Manager and acts as an advocate for carers and the care service. He regularly visits schools and gives presentations on being a carer. One of the main challenges Ross experienced as a young carer was the lack of male support workers. This affected his confidence and willingness to talk about his caring role and the difficulties he was facing. Ross is proud to be an advocate for male carers and, through his work in schools, encourages young men to consider working in the care sector.

Joseph

"There should be more understanding from men to accept male carers."

Joseph has cared for his younger sister since he was four years old. However, he didn't realise he was a carer until he started going to a young carers project when he was eight. Joseph was often late for school because he had to help his sister get to her class before he went to his. The school were quite flexible about him coming to class late (as long as it wasn't an exam day) because they knew about his caring responsibilities. However, some teachers were more understanding of his situation than others.

Joseph left school at the age of 16 and went onto college to do an interior design course. By this point Joseph was living away from home so his caring responsibilities were reduced, however, he still looked after his sister when needed. He thinks it's important that schools and colleges recognise that not all carers have the same responsibilities. *"There should really be an emphasis on the fact that not all carers are stereotypical. There's all different levels to caring."*

Joseph strongly feels that young male carers are not given the same access to support as young female carers. He has witnessed some people not believing young men when they've said that they care for somebody. *"I've seen people that have been told, even by the Jobcentre and stuff, that because they're male they can't really be a carer."* This can mean that young male carers are reluctant to disclose and don't get the support they need.

Ben

"Be confident, be proud of what you do. Don't let it stop you from achieving your goals and never be afraid to ask for help."

Ben has been caring from a young age, but was able to focus on his studies and achieve good grades thanks to the support he received from his school. However, Ben knows this isn't the case for most young carers. He feels it's important that schools and colleges are aware if students are carers, as their responsibilities will almost definitely have an impact on their education. By being aware of their needs, schools and colleges can offer the best possible support to carers and get the best out of them.

Ben has found that there can be a stigma attached to caring, and this is especially the case for young male carers. He urges young men to speak out about their caring experiences and be proud of what they do.

“Despite the fact they’re doing a great thing, young carers, especially men, don’t feel confident to speak out about their experiences. I urge them to do so though, they will feel better for it. Like me, they should be proud of what they do. It’s up to them whether they tell others about what they do, but I believe they should always be able to tell people without feeling ashamed in any way.”

Ben feels that his caring role has shaped him as a person and helped him become who he is, and the support he’s received during this time has helped him to achieve his goals. Ben has gained a lot of experience through his caring role, and he feels it has given him some great opportunities for which he is extremely grateful.

WHAT ISSUES ARE FACED BY MALE YOUNG ADULT CARERS?

The case studies above illustrate the unique challenges experienced by male young adult carers. In summary, these are:

- Support services often do not understand or believe that young men can have caring responsibilities. This means they don’t often get offered the same level and types of support as young female carers.

‘I’ve seen people that have been told, even by the Jobcentre and stuff, that because they’re male they can’t really be a carer.’

- Young male carers can be reluctant to ask for help, for fear of being bullied or because they are worried that people will assume they can’t support their family. This means they may not ask for support when they need it.

‘I think often, especially with young male carers, they feel they can’t ask for help, they have to take it all on on their own and they’re very reluctant to share the information with anyone, possibly for the reason of getting teased or just looking like they can’t cope. Whereas I think young females would be better at asking for support when they need it and not being ashamed of it.’

- The lack of male support workers can make it difficult for young male carers to talk about the challenges they face and how being a carer affects them.

IMPROVING SUPPORT FOR MALE YOUNG ADULT CARERS

Learning providers and support services can improve the support available to male young adult carers by:

- Working proactively to tackle gender stereotypes around caring. Frontline staff in support services need training to become more aware that young men can and do take on caring responsibilities and will need the same level of support as young female carers.
- Targeted engagement of male young adult carers. This could be done through a marketing campaign with emphasis on the fact that it is acceptable for male young adult

carers to ask for help with reassurances that they are not “weak” for doing so and by offering informal activities/sessions that are appropriate for young men:

“I know it’s easier said than done, but to just reinforce the fact that they’re not stupid for asking for help. In fact, it’s quite the opposite: if help is needed it’s important that the help goes to that person, for the wellbeing of the person they’re caring for and themselves.”

- Encouraging male carers to take on advocacy roles to raise awareness of the needs of male young adult carers.
- Providing peer support groups aimed specifically at young male carers so they can share their experiences of caring in a safe and non-judgemental space.

L&W has produced a range of resources to support young adult carers in learning and work – please visit <http://www.niace.org.uk/our-work/life-and-society/citizens-curriculum/young-adult-carers>

FURTHER INFORMATION AND CONTACT

If you have any comments or feedback on this briefing paper, please contact:

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