

As many as 1 in 10 Canadian youth have had or will have the responsibility of caring for an adult.

Young Carers

Gaining Visibility in Canada

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Young carers are young people who provide significant care in the home to family members in need as a result of illness, disability or other challenges. Like other family caregivers, young carers may help a grandparent take the right medication. They may help look after a chronically ill sister or stay up worrying about what to do if their father's dialysis machine stops working during the night. The variety of duties they take on is almost endless.

While young carers are found in every classroom in Canada, they are too often invisible to their teachers and others who could provide support when needed. As such, young carers may not receive the care that *they* need. When properly supported, young caregiving can be a positive life experience. However, without proper support, young carers can run into educational, health and social barriers that may last a lifetime. These barriers translate into costs and lost opportunities for young carers and for society.

These costs were outlined last summer when the Vanier Institute of the Family released the report "Young Carers in Canada: The Hidden Costs and Benefits of Young Caregiving." Since that time, inspired by the Vanier report, a group of young Canadians has conducted additional research through the Action Canada Fellowship. They struck a Task Force after learning that early research suggests that as many as 1 in 10 Canadian youth have had or will have the responsibility of caring in the home. And, according to Janet Fast at the University of Alberta, 10.2% of women and 7.4% of men caregivers over the age of 45 first provided care as an adolescent or young adult (under age 25), totalling more than 338,000 young caregivers in Canada, based on an analysis of the 2007 General Social Survey.

Although being a young carer can be tough, it can also be rewarding. It teaches responsibility and empathy, and brings new closeness between the caregiver and the cared-for. Unfortunately, young

carers often bear the burden of caregiving alone and in silence. Too often, the stresses of being a young carer seep into other parts of their lives. Young carers can show up to school exhausted after staying up all night with an ill parent or misbehave in class because of frustrations at home. These behaviours can lead to a "troublemaker" label, alienation and an increased risk of dropping out of school.

The issue presents a unique opportunity to learn from other jurisdictions that have responded to young carers, namely, the UK and Australia. The UK conducts a national survey to gain insight into the number of young carers. Some schools there also have "Young Carer Cards," which can help young people identify themselves discreetly to a teacher. In Australia, the country champions various rights for young carers. These are just a few examples of many opportunities for Canadians to take action in supporting these youth.

Just as an adult may need to choose between working in the labour force and caring for a seriously ill or injured loved one, a young person may face a distressing choice between doing their homework and providing home care. A better understanding of this invisible population will help them better manage their multiple responsibilities without negative consequences for their own health and their futures.

Vass Bednar is a 2012–2013 Action Canada Fellow. Her Task Force focused on the challenge of young carers in Canada and produced the report "Who Cares About Young Carers? Raising Awareness for an Invisible Population" in February 2013.



For a young carer's perspective, see "Lucky" the *Young Carer Rap*, a Vanier Institute of the Family partnership project at <http://bit.ly/1dVTE8S>.

