

5 things to know about young carers

A young carer is a person under the age of 18 who looks after someone in their life. [The Children's Society](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/supporting-young-carers/facts-about-young-carers) thinks that around 800,000 young people in the UK have caring responsibilities. A lot of people assume that young carers only look after disabled relatives, but young carers can also support people because of other reasons like, illness, mental health conditions, or drug and alcohol dependencies.

Girlguiding Scotland’s widening participation officer Rebecca shares her experience of being a young carer with her 5 things to know about working with young people with caring responsibilities.

**Thoughts from Rebecca**

First things first, I can’t speak for all young carers. All I can do is share the things I wish the adults around me had known when I was younger, coupled with the things I have learned from working with young carers throughout my career. So here we go:

1. Young carers see difficult things

Let’s start off with the tough one. Lots of young carers are often exposed to things that are difficult to deal with. Whether it’s seeing a loved one sick, in pain, or in distress, juggling caring with other responsibilities, or providing emotional support to someone who might be dealing with some very grown-up issues. I was often told that I was very mature for my age, but that’s only because I had to be. Coping with caring still took a toll on me and sometimes I felt like I couldn’t tell people I was struggling because everyone thought I was so mature. It’s a vicious circle.

Young carers might feel more stressed, anxious, or tired than their peers. Activities like guiding can give time off from caring responsibilities, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they can just leave it all at the door. They might be worried about being away from the person they care for or just be feeling a little overwhelmed.

Making small adjustments, like letting a young carer keep their phone nearby, can help them feel much more relaxed. This way they can get involved in the meeting but know that they can still be reached. Sometimes I would have been grateful for someone to talk to or even a few quiet moments of calm. Try having an open conversation with them about things you could do to make them more comfortable.

1. Lots of young people don’t realise they are carers

This may sound strange, but lots of young people don’t even know that they are carers. If their lives have always been this way then they may not know any different or simply not realise that what they are doing is caring. This was definitely the case with me as I didn’t really know what a young carer was, let alone realise I had been one, until I was an adult. This means that young carers might not be getting the support that they need. I was often quite hard on myself when I was struggling to keep up with homework or was tired in class because I didn’t realise that my friends weren’t dealing with the extra responsibility and stress that I was. Having that knowledge would have been so helpful to me and made a massive difference to my confidence. This is why making caring more visible is so important! One of the best ways of doing this is to have a little read up on what a carer is and be open to having conversations around caring.

1. Every young carer will have a different experience

Even 2 young people caring for someone with the same disability or condition can have very different experiences and responsibilities. Some will do household tasks like cooking and food shopping. Others might give physical care like helping someone to dress or get out of bed. Lots of young carers even help give medication, manage family budgets, and take care of siblings.

Even if you have had young carers in your unit before, don’t assume that you know the best ways to support them. They might have different responsibilities or feel differently about being a carer. Ask them if they would like support and in what ways.

1. Young carers are awesome

Sometimes it might seem all doom and gloom but there are some great things about being a carer. Although it was difficult, caring taught me a lot about empathy, being supportive, and recognising other people’s struggles. You never know what is going on in someone’s life so try to be understanding if someone misses a few meetings, forgets their uniform, or doesn’t put their best foot forward sometimes. Remember how much they are taking on and how great they are doing!

1. And finally, young carers can be very resilient

But that doesn’t mean they don’t need a bit of help every now and again.

For more help and information on caring see the resources available through the Girlguiding Scotland online [diversity and inclusion hub](https://www.girlguidingscotland.org.uk/for-volunteers/how-to-run-your-unit/diversity-and-inclusion-at-girlguiding-scotland/).