

Reaching Young Carers in Early Childhood:

A Kaleidoscope of very young care giving.

By Carly Ellicott, MA, MSc, GMBPsS

PhD Candidate University of Plymouth, Faculty of Health, School of Psychology.

Introduction

When we think about young carers, we often picture older children. Emerging research, identified through Carly Ellicott's Young Carers in Early Childhood Research Programme, reminds us that caring responsibilities can begin much earlier in life. In fact there is no lower age limit placed upon the definition of a young carer, nor are there age limitations specified in a legal context for an assessment of need under the Children and Families Act, 2014 and the Young Carers (Needs Assessments) Regulations 2015.

Young carers are defined in England as 'a person under 18 who provides or intends to provide care for another person' (Children Act 1989 section 17ZA).



The Young Carers (Needs Assessment) regulations 2015 stipulate that local authorities must 'consult persons with expertise and knowledge in relation to the young carer, where they consider it appropriate to do so'. Evidence indicates caring activity often remains unidentified for up to ten years from the point at which children begin to take on caring responsibility. Despite this, representation of young carers, specifically in early childhood policy and guidance, has remained largely absent from the sector and broader young carer narratives.

Efforts to improve advocacy and early identification of very young caregiving are driving changes to recording the prevalence of known young carers in early childhood.



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The recent school census found 127 young carers identified in early years provision and a further 847 in reception – this remains a huge underrepresentation, with actual figures understood to more likely reflect 10% of all children globally holding a level of caring responsibility during childhood. It is imperative, in order to mitigate associated outcomes for young carers, that Ofsted and the Department for Education align the Early Years Inspection Toolkit with all other inspection remits to ensure that stronger practice includes reaching our youngest carers at the earliest opportunity.

Viewing evidence through the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) in her work, Carly encourages practitioners to move beyond asking: **'What is wrong with this child and their family member?'**

towards asking: **'What has happened to this child and their family?'**

'What meaning might the child be making of their experiences?'

'What strengths are helping them to survive?'

'How has power operated in their lives?'

(Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).



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The Elephant in the Room: Supporting the UK's Youngest Carers

In the UK, children as young as three are providing care, yet they remain largely invisible. This research, based on UK-wide professional focus groups, exposes the crisis and outlines a path forward.

A Hidden Crisis: The Problem



Hidden for a Decade
Many young carers are not identified for up to 10 years, often until a family crisis.

Systemic Failures
Create a "Postcode Lottery"
Inconsistent laws and service gaps across the UK leave the youngest carers unprotected.

Facing Unthinkable Risks
Factors linked to early caregiving are found in child suicide cases, a leading cause of death.

A Path Forward: The Solution



Integrate Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC)
Leverage the UK's 54,700+ childcare providers for early identification and whole family assessment.

Build Trust & Use Creative Engagement
Move from paperwork to relational support, using tools like play, art, and storytelling.

Strengthen Legal Protections
Review and align statutory mandates to ensure the rights of all young carers are enforced.

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A PTMF lens for safeguarding

The PTMF, developed by a team of psychologists with the British Psychological society **sought to offer a trauma-informed, contextual perspective to understanding distress. Rather than locating distress solely within the individual**, the lens invites practitioners (in the context of this research) to consider how factors such as economic disadvantage, familial illness, disability, domestic abuse, substance abuse, addiction, mental health and limited support networks shape children's experiences. This helps us to reflect on the stories children and families have to share and understand their responses to often complex family circumstances, rather than narrowing the point of view to one deficit alone.

This lens helped to uncover a **kaleidoscope of young caregiving**, viewed from the perspectives of professionals, persons with lived experience, family members and importantly the voice of young carers in early childhood. It helped to challenge ideology surrounding moral and ethical assumptions of who young carers are most likely to be. Importantly, it drew out strengths including **the importance of relational pedagogy**, providing resources and materials to young children so that they can begin to see themselves represented in society; and to break down barriers which for so long have enabled shame and fear to exist in spaces where children and families should feel a greater sense of belonging.

Alongside the research, a gap in representation of young carers in early childhood was defined within children's literature, and so the Young Carers Illustration Project was developed. Illustrated by Ana Graca, one of the books, 'Young Carers in Space', co designed with young carers, was selected to be read as part of a series of National Carers Week events. **The reading was aired as part of CBeebies' bedtime hour**, and is available for streaming, with more than **2 million views** on you tube alone. The key message calls **for young carers in early childhood to be seen**, to have their voices heard and recognised in all spaces they occupy.

We argue that young carers in early childhood are not hiding. There is a failing of society to reach out, to recognise their capabilities and capacities to provide care, and in response provide the support they are legally entitled to.



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Implications for practice

The Early years sector are well placed to identify early caring responsibility and importantly vulnerability to increased caregiving over time, and acts of inappropriate caregiving. During observations and in everyday practice subtle changes are noted, trusting relationships with families are formed, and interactions are responded to with curiosity rather than judgement. Using the PTMF to frame safeguarding practice helps to support reflective conversations about the way in which power, threat, meaning and strengths, operate in the lives of families, helping identify young carers in early childhood, advocating for their needs and voice, and enabling timely support.



What settings can do

1. Include young carers and their family members in safeguarding discussions when a family member requires care and support.
2. Use reflective supervision within teams informed by PTMF questions to support practice.
3. Build strengths-based partnerships with families, professionals and the wider community to reduce stigma and social shame.
4. Develop links with local young carers services. Where a local authority is implementing commissioned services for age specific support, challenge their approach to the support and identification of young carers in early childhood.
5. Provide staff teams with training and development opportunities to support early identification and awareness of young caregiving.
6. Ensure appropriate information is shared during transitions, including transitions to school to support early identification and ongoing support.
7. Centre the voice of young carers in early childhood in all matters that concern them.

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Conclusion

Recognising young carers in early childhood is about seeing the needs of the child as a whole within the context of their family. By combining emerging research and resources practitioners can strengthen safeguarding through compassionate, evidence-informed and relational practice.

To learn more about the research, resources or to contact Carly for support and advice follow the links:

Carly.ellicott-1@postgrad.plymouth.ac.uk

www.linkedin.com/in/carly-ellicott-2613a9b1

[Miss Carly Ellicott - University of Plymouth](#)

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Carly Ellicott



Carly has extensive experience of supporting children, young people and their families within practice, education, leadership, management and inspection roles (private education, FE and HE, third sector organisations and on behalf of the Department of Education, UK.) Her experiences are underpinned by academic studies from both the University of Plymouth and Pengreen Research Base, from which she gained two master's degrees: one in Psychology and the other in Early Childhood Education (Integrated working with children and their families). This dual disciplinary lens led to her recent PhD research at the University of Plymouth, with a supervision team providing expertise from the fields of Psychology and Early Childhood Studies. The Young Carers in Early Childhood research programme has sought to provide a voice for and with young carers in early childhood (0-8yrs), an underrepresented group, utilising qualitative methodologies.