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Who cares for the Young Carers?

Robert Witton¹ and Abigail Nelder²

Dear Editor,

In the latest Census there were a reported 5 million people over the age of 5 years providing unpaid care in 2021¹. We would like to raise awareness of this group to dental teams and in particular, of children who provide caring responsibilities. Young carers are defined as children under 18 years of age and who help to look after a relative with a disability, illness, mental health condition, or drug or alcohol problem².

The numbers of Young Carers are high, with a Barnado's report estimating there may be up to 700,000 young carers in the UK³. More locally, 907 young carers were identified through the 2020 Plymouth Young Carer School survey⁴. Of these 522 (58%) were disadvantaged and 123 (14%) had an attendance of less than 90% at school due to caring responsibilities, which can vary considerably.

Working with Young Carers and community organisations in Plymouth that support them has been eye opening for our dental students. Being a Young Carer presents multiple challenges to oral health, for example some Young Carers can be as young as 5 years of age, and this may impact on their resources and ability to perform personal oral hygiene at home or arrange dental visits. This puts Young Carers at increased risk of dental disease, and they are a high priority group for accessing dental care, yet little is known about the oral healthcare needs of these children and how best to create a suitable care pathway for them. Many of the Young Carers we speak to are also sensitive to their social circumstances, which may limit their agency in seeking dental help when they need it.

Awareness in dental teams of the needs of Young Carers, and the number of young children in the community with caring responsibilities may facilitate better understanding of their oral care needs and improved access to dental care. The challenge for dental teams is that it may not always be obvious who is a Young Carer, and more work needs to be done to think about how dental care can be provided to this group in a sensitive and equitable way at the individual, community and system level. Barnado's describe Young Carers as hidden and ignored³, the challenge is for this not to be the case for their oral health.

1. Census 2021. Available at: <https://census.gov.uk/census-2021-results/phase-one-topic-summaries/health-disability-and-unpaid-care/unpaid-care> (accessed January 2023).
2. Being a young carer: your rights. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/support-and-benefits-for-carers/being-a-young-carer-your-rights/#:~:text=You're%20a%20young%20carer,or%20drug%20or%20alcohol%20problem> (accessed January 2023).
3. Barnado's. Still Hidden, Still Ignored. Available at: <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Still%20Hidden%20Still%20Ignored%20Barnardo%27s%20young%20carers%20report.pdf> (accessed January 2023).
4. Plymouth City Council. Plymouth Young Carers School Survey. Plymouth City Council: Plymouth 2020

(433 words)

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