

Raising the aspirations and awareness for young carers towards higher education



University of the West of England

What is the initiative?

The University of the West of England (UWE) Young Carers Mentoring Scheme

Who runs it?

The University of the West of England in partnership with the young carers service at The Carers Support Centre (Bristol and South Gloucestershire) and local schools

Who does it benefit?

Young carers from primary to secondary school age living in Bristol and South Gloucestershire.

What does it do?

The Young Carers Mentoring Scheme works with young carers to raise their awareness of higher education opportunities and raise their aspirations of moving into higher education. It also provides practical support to improve young carers' attainment.

When did it start?

2010.

Why was it started?

Many young carers are not known to be caring by school staff, and many actively try to conceal their caring roles from teachers, pastoral staff and peers for fear of bullying or outside interference in their families. Being a young carer can be a hidden cause of poor attendance, under achievement and bullying, with many young carers dropping out of school or achieving no qualifications. 27% of young carers (aged 11–15) miss school or experience educational difficulties (40% where children care for a relative with drug or alcohol problems) (Dearden and Becker, 2004).

This is a group that is often overlooked in regards to raising aspirations and awareness around higher education and it was felt therefore that this group in particular would benefit from a mentoring programme.

In research carried out by UWE with Year 8 and Year 9 pupils at Bristol schools, 22% of respondents said that they spend on average two hours or more each day looking after members of their family, including siblings, or doing domestic chores.

What are the aims and objectives?

The aim of the Young Carers Mentoring Scheme is to raise young carers' awareness of the higher education opportunities available to them, to raise their aspirations and also to provide practical support to improve their attainment.

The mentoring aims to provide individualised support for young carers who may be experiencing negative impact as a result of being a young carer such as regular or increased lateness or absence, concentration problems, anxiety, tiredness, under-achievement, late or incomplete homework, a sudden unexplained drop in attainment, bullying or behavioural issues which can sometimes be the result of anger or frustration expressed inappropriately.

How is it funded?

The scheme is funded by UWE.

What has it achieved?

“It was good [my mentor] had experience, she knew what I was going through, she understood and gave me good advice.”

Mentee

“One mentee the other day was singing its praises saying how brilliant it (the mentoring project) was because it was so regular, there was a lot of contact. They could talk about school; about whatever she wanted to talk about.”

Young Carers' Service Worker

The lack of support for young carers in schools was a key reason for strong school engagement. Embedding of the mentoring scheme within the school has helped schools develop their own awareness of the needs of young carers and the support that is available for them.

The mentoring project has actively engaged with a number of young carers who were at considerable risk of not fulfilling their educational potential and it is proving successful in raising the awareness and the aspirations of young carers to engage and progress with their education. It has also made a positive impact on how young carers view themselves as learners – with the potential to go on to further and higher education.

Young carers have valued highly the opportunity of having someone to talk to, confide in and listen to their problems, educational or otherwise. Many of the young carers feel that they could only receive this support from their mentors and would not be able to seek this through their teachers, for example.

There is some evidence of raised educational aspirations, most notably increased aspirations about progressing to the next stage of education, rather than higher education. There are also indications that the ongoing relationship with the mentor has impacted on the mentees' perception of their abilities and educational potential. Moreover, a number of mentees have significantly increased their attendance at school and their engagement in classes.

The project has had a considerable impact on young carers' confidence and self-esteem, which has subsequently enabled them to move towards their educational goals and succeed in negotiating an educational transition. There is also some evidence to suggest that the mentoring is having a positive impact on learning behaviour. Fewer exclusions and greater control over issues such as anger management can be attributable to mentees developing more effective communication and decision making skills.

An unintended outcome is the reassurance the work has given to the mentors themselves. For some, it has enabled recognition of themselves as young carers. The project has also helped mentors develop their own skills, helped them in their own thinking about future career options, reinforced their feelings of belonging at university and helped to reduce feelings of isolation.

Finally, the project has been successful in raising the awareness of the needs of young carers with schools, many of whom had limited knowledge of the needs of young carers. It has provided schools with links to local partners whom they can work collaboratively with, to bring support to their pupils who have caring responsibilities and it has provided, often for the first time, pupils with an additional intervention from an external organisation.

How have carers and their families been involved in planning and delivering this work?

There was no specific consultation when initially implementing the scheme, however, young people responded positively when they were asked for their views whether to expand the mentoring online. As a result this has now been implemented.

Mentees are given an evaluation questionnaire at the end of the year.

How is the initiative run?

The Young Carers Mentoring Scheme was conceived by and is led by the Mentoring Lead from the UWE Schools and Partnership Service. From the beginning, involvement and guidance was sought from the Carers Support Centre who valued the opportunity to input into the design of the project. The knowledge and understanding demonstrated by UWE was instrumental in persuading the Carers Support Centre to lend its support.

The Carers Support Centre was already engaged with a range of multi-agency partnerships including schools and although some schools had established a named member of staff for young carers, this was by no mean universal.

In establishing the scheme, UWE made contact with schools to introduce the aims and objectives of the project. This was done through a member of staff with responsibility for young carers if there was one, or through the head teacher or the head of year.

The mentoring scheme recruits only UWE student mentors who have either had some experience of being a young carer themselves or who have had second-hand experience of the issues faced by young carers through a friend or relative, for example. Mentors will therefore bring their own experience to the role and can share for example, their own experiences of progressing through further and higher education.

Adverts promoting the mentoring positions are sent out through the university Job Shop in the weekly email and students are able to apply online. Initially, the university undertook a separate recruitment for mentors with a young carer background although recruitment of students for this scheme has now been amalgamated into the general recruitment process for student mentors.

Those students who are suitable for the role are given an interview and students who are offered the role undergo a three hour training session from the Mentoring Lead. This covers topics on child protection, listening skills and managing challenging behavior as well as the practical issues related to the role. In addition, the young carers service also delivers a three hour session on issues specifically related to young carers. All student mentors need to be enthusiastic, motivated and committed to mentoring for the year and they all undergo a Criminal Record Bureau check.

Students are paid £8.25 per hour and will take on either one or two mentees for one and a half hours each per week.

The Carers Support Centre, which covers Bristol and South Gloucestershire, identifies young carers who will benefit from the scheme and with their permission and the permission of their parents, puts their name forward to the university. The Mentoring Lead then sets up an initial meeting in the young carer's school with a member of staff, the young carer and the student mentor in order to introduce the mentor to the mentee and arrange a first mentoring session. Both parties are reminded that engaging in the mentoring scheme is voluntary and that either party may stop the arrangement if they wish.

If both parties are happy, then individual mentoring will run from around October until the end of the student year in May, to fit in with the student timetable. Students mentor individual young carers aged 8–18 on a weekly basis during term time. Currently there are ten young carers who are being mentored through the scheme. In addition to individual mentoring, some students are also supported with group social activities, run by the young carers service, if this is required.

The mentoring has primarily an academic focus and a booklet providing a structure for sessions has been developed to support mentors. Weekly sessions will include study skills such as mind mapping, and opportunities for young carers to explore future educational and career options beyond 16, the most appropriate pathways for themselves and to consider the differences between school and further and higher education. Sessions also provide young carers with practical support with homework, coursework and revision.

Mentors work with their mentees in their primary or secondary school or college with care being taken not to specifically identify the mentee as a young carer. Where possible, male mentors are placed with male mentees and female mentors with female mentees.

Once a mentoring partnership has been established the school takes on the role of facilitating this. They are tasked with briefing school staff about the project, gaining timetable clearance for pupils to take time away from lessons and ensuring the mentors and mentees have appropriate space to meet.

More recently, the mentoring provision has been expanded through an online E-mentoring service Bright Links. This has enabled mentors and mentees to connect in a safe environment and has allowed the continuation of relationships and the momentum of mentoring between the face-to-face sessions in school. This online communication also enables mentors to provide a quick response to any questions and a safe space for mentees to raise questions or concerns which they may have been reluctant to address in person.

What methods have been particularly effective?

The recruitment and training of skilled student mentors has been effective. Recruiting students from UWE who themselves have experience (either directly or indirectly) of the issues faced by young carers has been important. Having personal experience has helped mentors to have empathy with the young carers and support them to move positively forward.

Having a positive working relationship with a specialist community based organisation has been important. The Carers Support Centre has facilitated the identification of appropriate young carers for the intervention and has used their expertise to provide training for the UWE mentors.

Using the booklet to help structure tailored support for young carers to their meet educational goals is effective.

Have there been any challenges along the way?

There is little doubt that the mentoring project successfully targets young people who are facing challenges in their education and are likely to face considerable difficulties in the transition to their next stage of education and subsequently higher education.

However, the complexity of the lives and responsibilities of both the mentors and the mentees presented a key challenge in sustaining mentoring relationships. The young carers often faced disruption both in their personal and academic lives and they were consequently a difficult group to work with. This was reflected in the high withdrawal rate of mentees and the amount of school that some mentees have missed.

Similarly, the mentors, many who were carers themselves, had a higher than expected drop-out rate due often to their responsibilities – whether they were still living with the person they were caring for, or caring at a distance.

The project experienced fairly common delays due to unanticipated challenges including delays in Criminal Record Bureau checks and identifying the young carers. Unless an established relationship with a school was already in place, it often took a long time to engage schools in the project. This all impacted on the start of some of the relationships and led to challenges in building momentum.

For many of the mentees, supporting family members by providing care was an established aspect of part of their everyday lives and had been for a significant period of time. For some mentees, their experience of, and feelings towards school were sometimes negative. The responsiveness of schools to their needs varied; and while some schools were supportive all the mentees had felt that their school could have been more supportive.

Matching the mentoring pairs was not achieved in any precise or scientific way. Pairings were based on matching certain personal characteristics, skills or experiences and it often came down to gut feelings about how mentees and mentors would get on. It was difficult to pin down the exact reasons why some relationships worked well, however, the fit between the mentor and mentee was extremely important.

What hints and tips might help me get started?

- Focus the mentoring on the young carer. The Carers Support Centre believes that because the project has worked through the schools, and is not based in young carers' homes, the mentoring focus has remained on the young carer. If this had not been the case, then the role of the mentor might have been viewed as supporting the whole family with the focus removed from the young carer.
- Importantly, establish a relationship from the very start with organisations that are already working with young carers in the community. This is essential since without this, the mentoring scheme will not be able to gain any momentum and establish itself.
- Ensure that mentors are committed to providing support over the long term and try hard to identify a committed School Lead who understands and values the nature of the project and who is willing to champion the work within the school.
- Build open and clear routes of communication and ensure there is clarity of roles and responsibilities between key partners from the outset to enable challenges to be addressed swiftly and for all partners to feel engaged.

Are there any useful documents or resources that could assist me?

Further information about the booklet used to support the mentoring sessions and an evaluation of the project can be requested from UWE.

Bright Links E-mentoring.

Where can I get further information?

Rubina Akhtar, Senior Partnerships and Programmes Officer or
Sarah Openshaw, Senior Partnerships and Programmes Officer
University of the West of England
Frenchay Campus
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol BS16 1QY

Email: rubina.akhtar@uwe.ac.uk or sarah.openshaw@uwe.ac.uk

Tel: 0117 3282259

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