

A structured course to identify and support young carers affected by the stresses and challenges of caring



What is the initiative?

Young Carers Self Exploration Groups

Who runs it?

Winchester & District Young Carers in partnership with secondary schools within the Winchester District

Who does it benefit?

Secondary school aged pupils with caring responsibilities (young carers) and schools.

What does it do?

The Self Exploration Groups form an intrinsic part of a wider, structured approach to raise awareness of young carers' issues within schools, identify young carers and assess and target appropriate support for pupils who are young carers.

The groups also facilitate pupils who are young carers to support each other in working through the emotional aspects of their caring roles.

When did it start?

2004.

Why was it started?

The current Self Exploration Group programme grew out of the Student Assistance Programme (SAP) run by Student Assistance Training International. In 2004, SAP was running in schools in other areas and in particular Andover Young Carers was using the generic SAP course in local schools and this was seen to be having a positive impact. At the time, very few referrals to the young carers service were coming from schools. Those referrals that the service was receiving from schools

came primarily from Education Welfare Officers and at a point when young carers were already often missing substantial amounts of school.

The groups were seen as an excellent way to forge and develop partnership work with schools in order to identify and support young carers in a preventative way before there were negative impacts on pupils' education and wellbeing.

What are the aims and objectives?

Aims:

- To work in partnership to implement a systematic approach to identifying and targeting appropriate support for young carers within schools.
- To improve the emotional wellbeing of pupils.

Objectives:

- To provide a safe environment for pupils with caring responsibilities to give and receive peer support through structured and focused group sessions.
- To identify more young carers in schools, assess their needs and target appropriate support.

How is it funded?

Original funding for the initial pilot project came from a grant from Winchester City Council. Funding for the project now comes from a mixture of local authority funding, and Big Lottery and Children in Need funding.

What has it achieved?

“It was very helpful to be able to talk to other people who are going through the same things as me and to be able to share my feelings and thoughts about what I do.”

Young carer

“It made me feel that it really matters what I think and that it's not all my fault.”

Young carer

“I learned loads of new ways to cope with being a young carer and now think of myself as well as others.”

Young carer

“My son has been able to define and accept his role and feel appreciated for what he does.”

Parent

“You provide our young carers with outstanding support.”

School staff member

The groups have led to the embedding of support for young carers in all five secondary schools across the district where the service works. They have provided a regular and systematic way of raising awareness within schools, as well as identifying, assessing and targeting appropriate support for young carers.

Very quickly, the initiative dramatically helped raise the awareness within schools of young people’s circumstances, increased the numbers of young carers identified within schools and the numbers who were referred to the service. It has also ensured that staff are acutely aware of the young carers within their school and that pupils with caring responsibilities are also linked into the schools’ pastoral support.

Last year, school assemblies reached 3,800 students, leading to 70 students identifying themselves as carers. Of this group, 12 students have needed and been provided with extensive support at school and another six are receiving more intensive support both inside and outside of school through the wider service.

The groups have led to a noticeable increase in young carers’ self-confidence and through an appreciation that others have common challenges to their own, an increased ease in talking about the things that concern them and an acceptance of their family situation. Pupils learn through the experiences of others and realise through the structured discussions that they are ‘not the only one’. Pupils feel happier and more settled in school and are more confident to access support via school pastoral staff.

The Self Exploration Groups have increased the attendance of young carers at school lunchtime drop-in sessions that are delivered by the service.

Schools worker from other local young carers services have begun to co-facilitate the groups with the Schools and Support Co-ordinator before implementing the programme themselves through their own service.

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

At the end of the five session programme, pupils complete evaluation forms which are used to inform the development of the programme. As well as this, an annual evaluation interview with staff from schools is undertaken to continually develop the intervention.

How is the initiative run?

The initiative is overseen by a full-time Schools and Support Co-ordinator working across five secondary schools. In order to establish a structured approach to identifying young carers, awareness raising assemblies are held across each of the five schools, primarily for pupils in years seven and nine. This ensures that new pupils have the opportunity to self-identify as well as those who perhaps have taken on new caring roles or who find they are struggling with their caring roles alongside facing the pressures of exams and coursework. In some schools, young carers at the school who are already receiving support from the young carers service are often happy to take part in these assemblies and also to attend the Self Exploration Group at their school.

Following the assembly, all pupils are given a slip on which they can indicate whether they would like further information/have caring responsibilities and/or or would like a private meeting with the Schools and Support Co-ordinator. This one-to-one meeting establishes whether the pupil might have a caring role and if it is appropriate to invite the young person to take part in the Self Exploration Group. Where pupils are keen to be part of a group but they have little or no caring role, they are referred back to the school to join in with similar groups that the school is running.

The Self Exploration Group programme is then held within the school and sessions run weekly for five weeks. This can be extended if the groups are large in number and additional time is needed to cover the sessions. Each session is ideally facilitated by two people; normally the Schools and Support Co-ordinator alongside a volunteer. Occasionally, school staff might co-facilitate sessions.

Although many of the principles are based upon those of the SAP, the Self Exploration Group sessions are tailored for young carers and have a focus on addressing issues that they face. Each group will have between eight and 14 pupils from years 7–10. Each session lasts an hour and is based upon one of the following topics – Sharing the challenges of caring, Stress, Facing Fears, Using defences, Positive messages, and Visions, dreams and goals. During the first session the tools from the Manual for Measures of Caring Activities and Outcomes for Children and Young People is used to assess pupils caring responsibilities.¹

Some of the schools where the programme is being delivered are also running their own generic SAP programmes and some of the pupils might do both programmes if it is appropriate.

The weekly sessions allow young carers to talk about their worries, hopes and fears and help them to develop communication skills, coping strategies and social skills.

The group process itself supports assessment of each young person's level of caring. At the end of the programme participants have a one-to-one evaluation meeting with the Schools and Support Co-ordinator to ascertain whether they need any further support from the young carers service. Young carers with low needs can often be supported by the school directly.

If there are greater needs, and if the pupil chooses, they will be referred to Winchester & District Young Carers for further assessment and additional support. This might include further individual support in or out of the school, from the Schools and Support Co-ordinator, as well as referral to other agencies.

What methods have been particularly effective?

It is important that the sessions are very structured. In order to achieve this, a group contract is drawn up with the group at the start of the first session. At each session the purpose and guidelines are read out, for example when one person is sharing no one else is allowed to ask questions.

1 Joseph S, Becker F, Becker S (2012), 'Manual for Measures of Caring Activities and Outcomes for Children and Young People'. Carers Trust.

Have there been any challenges along the way?

It is a challenge ensuring pupils do not come out of the same class each week and therefore miss a regular lesson which would impact on their learning. Therefore, it has been important to work closely with schools to ensure that the sessions are held at different times throughout the week. Similarly, it is impressed upon pupils that the sessions should not come before exams or assessments and that if a session needs to be missed because of these then it can be rearranged as a one-to-one session with the Schools and Support Co-ordinator.

What hints and tips might help me get started?

- Ensure there is a suitable room available for each session. Ideally, it should be the same room which offers a safe and comfortable environment to support the group dynamics. It is important that staff or students passing by cannot see who is in the room, that it has comfortable seating if possible and plenty of space to enable sharing in pairs.
- Be sensitive about arrangements for pupils to come out of lessons. Schools need to be aware that some pupils may not wish their peers to know they are young carers.
- Communicate with school staff via a staff member with responsibility for young carers.
- Ensure group leaders have strong skills in running small groups. They must be empathetic, a good listener and reflective.

Are there any useful documents that could assist me?

Further details of The Self Exploration programme and other associated resources used in conjunction with the programme such as, tips on stress, positive thoughts advice and the group contract can be requested from Winchester & District Young Carers.

The **SAP website**.

Where can I get further information?

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