

## Young Carers

by Josie Padro



Though caregivers may have similar experiences, no two are alike. The Canadian Caregiver Coalition reports that the majority are women between the ages of 45 and 64. Caregivers, however, come in all ages, and one group that is often overlooked is young caregivers.

A 2012 report by the Vanier Institute, *Young Carers in Canada: The Hidden Costs and Benefits of Young Caregiving*, took a look at what life is like for youth 18 and under.

[These are teens who take on the care of their parents, grandparents, siblings or other relatives because of family situations in which there is no adult who can step in.](#)

Very often, whether it's due to a physical or mental illness, the health problem arises suddenly, leaving the young person with little time to learn caregiving skills. Even so, they perform a range of tasks such as giving medications, assisting with personal care, shopping, cooking and caring for siblings.

Investigators surveyed over 1,000 Vancouver high school students, ages 12 to 17, and found that about 12 percent answered "yes" to the question, "Do you spend any time taking care of an adult in your family because they cannot care for themselves?" Young carers were distributed equally across gender, financial circumstances and cultural backgrounds. Teens reported that caregiving comes with costs. Family responsibilities take away from social interaction, which is so important at this age, leading to feelings of isolation. Keeping up with school work can be a challenge.

Teens reported a high level of stress related to worry about the health of their loved one, their added responsibilities, and the loss of what they see as a “normal” life. The ability to cope varied depending on family circumstances. Those who cared for a relative with a mental illness and younger teens with heavy responsibilities fared less well. Young caregivers are advised to find someone to talk to – whether it’s a high school counsellor, teacher, coach, or mental health professional. Joining a support group is a good way to meet others with similar experiences and who understand the challenges.

Also important is to continue to take part in activities they enjoy and are good at. Despite the challenges, young carers say there are benefits from taking on the role. They report having an especially close connection with the person they care for. They believe that they develop greater compassion and have increased self-worth as a result of handling adult responsibilities.

#### Resources for young carers:

<http://www.powerhouseproject.ca/>

<http://www.youngcarersproject.ca/>