

SUPPORTING YOUNG CAREGIVERS IN SCHOOL

Across the U.S., an estimated 5.4 million children* and youth provide care for a parent, sibling, or relative with an illness, injury, mental health condition, or age-related needs. These young people—often referred to as “young caregivers”—help with daily tasks like bathing, feeding, managing medication, or simply providing emotional support.



Why It Matters for Schools

Young caregivers often shoulder adult responsibilities outside the classroom. While many are proud to help their families, this role can also impact their:

- **Attendance:** Absences may be linked to care duties at home or wait for another adult to drive them.
- **Concentration:** Worry about a family member can affect focus.
- **Social Engagement:** Caregivers may struggle to connect with peers and avoid after school programs..
- **Sleep and Energy:** Late-night caregiving or stress can lead to fatigue and difficulty keeping up with assignments.
- **Academic Performance:** Grades and participation can decline without a visible cause.

Alternatively, school may be their safe space, a refuge from care tasks and home stressors. This may come across as the youth not wanting to talk about care, but in reality, they need a respite and school is often that respite.

Make sure you give them space if needed.

A Note About Family Privacy

Some families hesitate to share caregiving dynamics out of fear of child removal or the stigma of living with an illness. *Respecting the privacy* of both the family and the student while gently offering support without pushing can serve to build trust with both. *Remind families* that in your classroom partnership between you and the family to support the child’s well-being is a shared priority and the goal in working with them.

Why Your Role Matters

Teachers and school staff are among the few consistent adults in a young caregiver's life. With awareness and empathy, you can be a stabilizing force, helping students balance their role at home with the chance to learn, grow, and just be kids.

What You Can Do

You don't need to be a therapist to make a difference. Here's how school staff can help:

- **Listen with curiosity and compassion.** Ask open-ended questions in private. Many kids don't volunteer this information because they don't want to feel different or "get in trouble" for what's happening at home.
- **Normalize and validate.** Let them know caregiving isn't something to hide and they're not alone.
- **Offer flexibility.** Extensions, adjusted expectations, or a safe space to decompress during the day can go a long way.
- **Refer and connect.** Work with your school counselor, nurse, or social worker to support the student and engage their family.
- **Share resources** for families, like GNYC, in classroom newsletters
- **Raise awareness.** Include information about youth caregivers in staff trainings, classroom discussions, or bulletin boards so students and colleagues alike know these roles exist.
- **Advocate for change.** Elevate the voices of young caregivers when speaking with administrators, policymakers, or community organizations. Their needs should be considered in attendance policies, homework expectations, and mental health services.

Want to learn more?

Check out '*At School: A Guide to Supporting Students Who Have Been Affected by ALS.*'

While the guide focuses on ALS, the insights and strategies apply to all young people who are caregiving for a loved one.



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