

# 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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