LiTTLE DREAMERS

2026 Annual Young Carer Survey

RESULTS

A note from our CEO

Each year, our Annual Young Carer Survey gives Young Carers and their families the opportunity to tell us about their experiences. This report shares what they told us in 2026, and what we believe needs to change as a result.

As someone who grew up as a Young Carer, I understand how much these experiences can shape a young person's education, wellbeing and future. This year's findings reflect what our team hears from Young Carers every day.

In 2026, 355 Young Carers and families took part. They told us that caring often begins by age 8, while recognition typically comes around two years later. They described the impact on school attendance and results, on wellbeing, and on family finances. They also spoke about the strengths caring can build, including empathy, maturity and a strong sense of purpose.

This is also the first year we can compare our findings with the previous year using the same method. The comparison shows that the pressures on Young Carers have not eased, and that the key patterns in this report are consistent across both years.

These findings point to practical steps that governments, schools, services, funders and communities can take: identifying Young Carers earlier, providing support directly to them, and making sure their own voices inform the decisions that affect them.

Thank you to every Young Carer and family who took the time to share their experiences with us.

Madeleine

Madeleine Buchner OAM
Founder and CEO, Little Dreamers Australia

At a glance

- **Age 8** is the average age Young Carers start caring.
- **8%** of Young Carers were first identified by their school.
- **77%** provide emotional support to the person they care for.
- **1 in 3** care for more than one person.
- **43%** miss school time every week because of caring.
- **76%** of 15 to 17 year olds say caring has affected their grades.
- **74%** of those who answered report their own mental health challenges.
- **46%** of families have gone without essentials such as food, bills or medicine.
- **1 in 2** households are under high financial strain.
- **86%** of 18 to 25 year olds spend their own money on caring.
- **89%** rate their Little Dreamers experience 4 or 5 out of 5.
- **Fewer than 3 in 10** know about Young Carer-specific support including the Young Carer Bursary or the Young Carer Network.

> *Being the one everyone counts on but not having enough room to make mistakes.* - Young Carer, 15 to 17

About the survey

The Annual Young Carer Survey is Little Dreamers' yearly check-in with Young Carers and families. A Young Carer is a young person aged 4 to 25 who provides unpaid care to a family member with disability, chronic illness, mental illness or substance use.

How it worked

- The survey was open online for five weeks from the 3rd of August - 4th of September 2026 and could be completed by a Young Carer themselves, or by a parent or guardian with or on behalf of their Young Carer.
- 388 responses were received. After removing responses that did not meet quality checks or were outside the survey's scope, 355 responses were analysed.
- The survey asked about caring roles, school and study, work, wellbeing and mental health, money, support services and Little Dreamers programs, plus three open questions in respondents' own words.

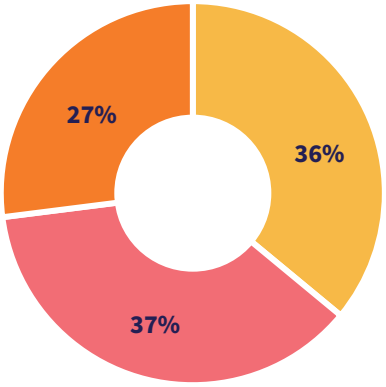
How to read the figures

- Percentages are of the people who answered each question, so the number of respondents varies across the report.
- Differences we highlight between groups were tested and are statistically significant, unless we describe them as an early signal.
- Where we compare with 2025, both years have been calculated the same way.
- Quotes are shared anonymously, lightly edited for spelling, with names removed. We note whether each was written by a Young Carer or by a parent.

An important note: most respondents are already connected to Little Dreamers, and most live in Victoria or Queensland. The findings describe the experiences of the Young Carers who took part, rather than every Young Carer in Australia. Because the most isolated Young Carers are the hardest to reach, the true picture is likely to be more challenging still.

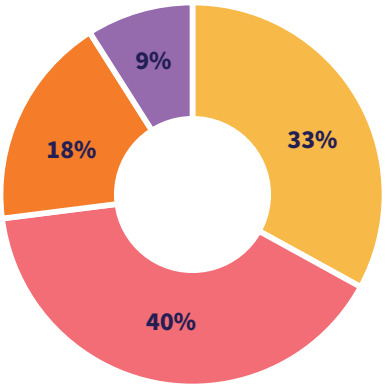
Who took part

WHO COMPLETED THE SURVEY



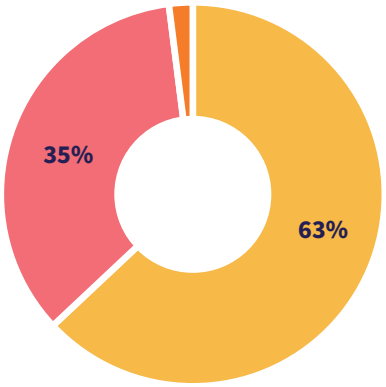
- **36%** Young Carers themselves
- **37%** Parents with their Young Carer
- **27%** Parents on behalf of their Young Carer

AGE OF THE YOUNG CARER



- **33%** 4 to 10
- **40%** 11 to 14
- **18%** 15 to 17
- **9%** 18 to 25

GENDER IDENTITY



- **63%** Female
- **35%** Male
- **2%** Non-binary or self-described

IDENTITY

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	11%
Culturally and linguistically diverse	13%
Living with their own disability or chronic illness	14%
LGBTQIA+	7%

CONNECTION TO LITTLE DREAMERS

80%

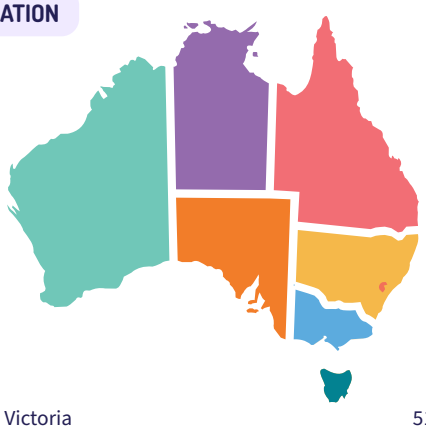
have taken part in a Little Dreamers program.

WHAT THEY DO

87%

are at school; others are studying, working or caring full-time.

LOCATION



Victoria	51%
Queensland	30%
New South Wales	14%
Other states and territories	5%

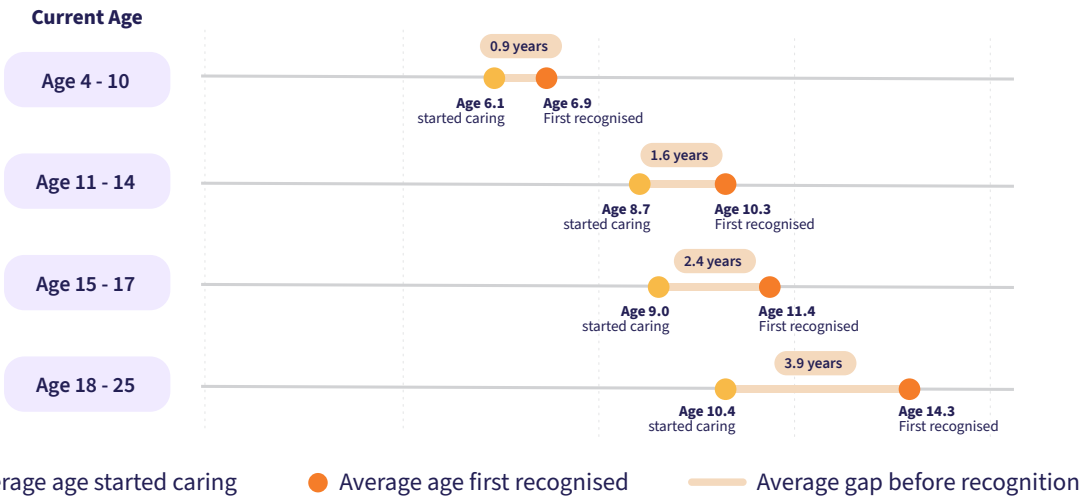
Almost half (46%) live in regional areas.

Caring starts early and is recognised late

Most Young Carers begin caring in primary school, and many care for years before anyone notices.

- On average, Young Carers are **first recognised as a Young Carer** at about age 10, around 1.6 years after they start their caring role. **The recognition gap is longest for older Young Carers:** 18 to 25 year olds describe nearly four years of caring before anyone noticed.
- Families are most likely to recognise a Young Carer (42%), followed by **carer support services** (28%), and then **schools** (8%).

We asked Young Carers of different ages when they began caring and when their caring role was first recognised. The average gap between these ages is shown below.



The years before recognition are mostly primary school years. **Schools** see Young Carers every day, yet **rarely identify them.** Young Carers who were recognised close to when they began caring were twice as likely to be receiving Young Carer-specific support (40% compared with 20% among 11 to 17 year olds).

These figures are likely to understate the gap, as everyone who took part had already been recognised in some way. **Young Carers who have never been identified are, by definition, the hardest to reach.**

> *"No one that I know understands exactly what I'm going through or what I experience."* - Young Carer, 18 to 25

What caring looks like

Caring is mostly emotional and practical work inside the family, and it becomes more adult with age.

Who they care for: 68% care for a sibling and 45% for a parent. Many care for both (17%).

More than one person: 1 in 3 care for more than one person, rising to 1 in 2 among 18 to 25 year olds. Those caring for three or more people are almost twice as likely to miss school each week (48% compared with 26%).

Diagnoses: the people they care for most often live with neurodiversity, including autism (49%), or mental illness (29%). Among 18 to 25 year olds, more than half (54%) care for someone with a mental illness.

What they do: emotional support (77%), looking after siblings (39%), personal care (31%), managing medication (20%) and translating or interpreting (18%).

Managing medication rises from 8% of 4 to 10 year olds to 50% of 18 to 25 year olds, and managing bills and budgets from 2% to 21%.

1 in 3 care for 11 or more hours a week, and 1 in 4 say their hours change a lot from week to week.

"I am a sister not a mum, I don't like having to tell my brother no, it should be a fun relationship all the time." - Young Carer aged 11 to 14

"Having to step up and do a lot more stuff at a young age compared to other kids." - Parent of a Young Carer aged 11 to 14

School and study

School is where the cost of caring shows first, and it peaks in the senior school years.

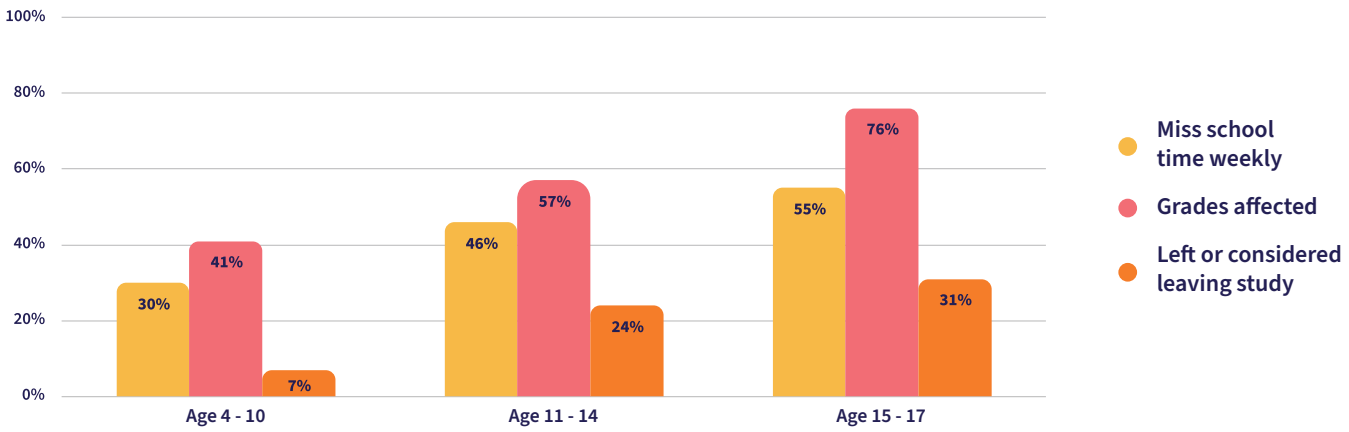
43% miss at least half a day of school every week because of caring, and 29% miss at least one full day.

55% say caring has affected their grades, rising to 76% of 15 to 17 year olds, the years of VCE, HSC and QCE.

1 in 5 have left, deferred, dropped subjects or considered leaving study. This rises with age, from 7% of 4 to 10 year olds to around half of 18 to 25 year olds still studying.

1 in 3 students have experienced bullying or another negative experience at school because of their caring role.

Only 8% were first identified as a Young Carer by their school.



Support often comes late compared to when caring responsibilities start. Students receiving flexible learning arrangements were already far more likely to be missing school **(55% compared with 21%).** This suggests support is often put in place once a student is visibly struggling, rather than early.

When it comes to employment - **more than 1 in 3** have left or turned down a job because of caring, and fewer than half of those with an employer receive adjustments for their caring role.

Wellbeing and mental health

Stress is part of everyday life for many Young Carers, and the help they need is often out of reach.

74% of those who chose to answer report their own mental health challenges, and 37% have a formal diagnosis.

In the past two weeks, **45%** often or always felt stressed or worried, **30%** felt sad or down, and **28%** found it hard to concentrate.

Half of 18 to 25 year olds often or always feel tired because of caring.

Nearly **1 in 4** are getting no mental health support at all, with family and friends being the most common source of support.

The biggest barriers to help are

46%	30%	24%	21%
Cost	Wait times	services that don't feel right for them	Stigma

28% usually or always feel left out or isolated.

1 in 4 missed most or all social events in the past month because of caring, peaking at **35%** of 11 to 14 year olds.

1 in 5 spend no time with friends in a typical week, and **1 in 5** rarely or never get time for themselves.

"Having to always put others' needs ahead of my own. Having to always be calm when I don't feel calm." - Young Carer aged 11 to 14, answered with a parent

Money and going without

Most Young Carer families are under financial pressure, and as they grow older, Young Carers increasingly pay for caring themselves.

58% say their family usually or always worries about money, rising from **43%** of families of 4 to 10 year olds to **70%** of 18 to 25 year olds.

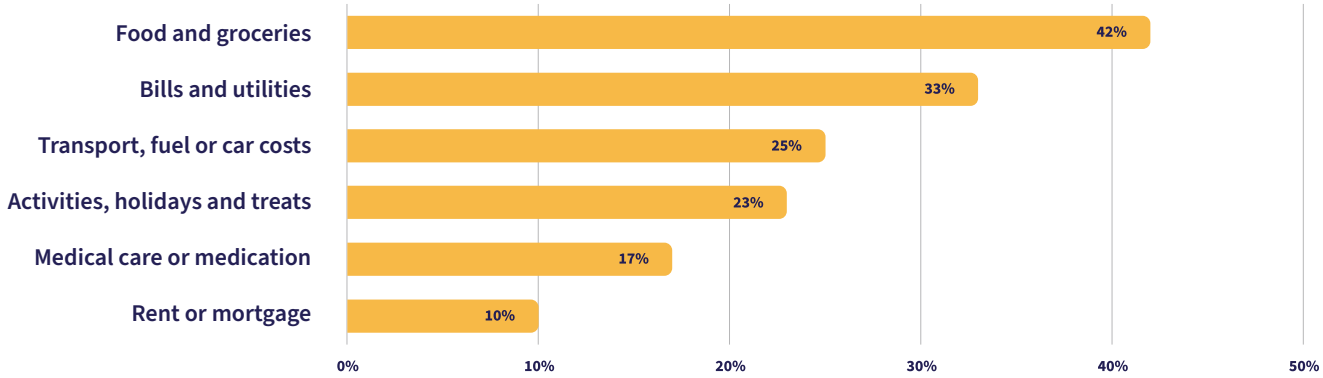
46% say their family went without something important in the past year.

60% often or sometimes need help with basic items such as food, school supplies and clothes.

32% spend their own money on caring, rising from **10%** of 4 to 10 year olds to **86%** of 18 to 25 year olds.

1 in 3 moved house in the past two years, and **17%** have no quiet space at home to study, rest or have privacy.

What families went without



*Respondents can select more than one option

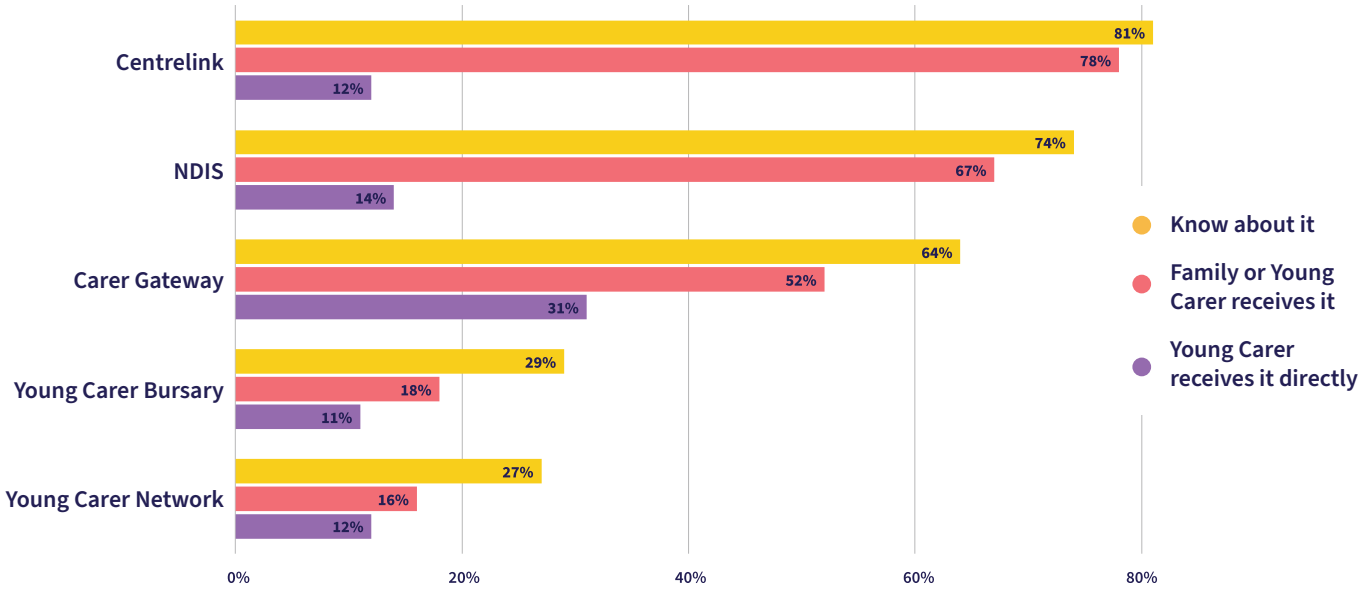
Half of households (**49%**) are under high financial strain. Young Carers in these households are six times as likely to miss school every week (**51% compared with 8%**), and more likely to feel isolated, stressed and sad.

"Can't afford Mum's main pain medication as it is $210 a month." - Young Carer aged 15 to 17, answered with a parent

Support that misses the Young Carer

Mainstream family supports reach almost everyone who knows about them. The supports designed specifically for Young Carers however, are the least known and the least received, and most support flows to the family rather than to the Young Carer.

How support reaches Young Carers



Fewer than 3 in 10 know about the Young Carer Bursary or the Young Carer Network, and around 4 in 10 of those who know are not receiving them.

Most support reaches the family, not the Young Carer - **78%** of families receive Centrelink payments, but only **12%** of Young Carers receive support in their own right. Carer Gateway is the main exception, reaching **31%** of Young Carers directly.

The gap is widest when the pressure is highest with **56%** of 15 to 17 year olds knowing about the Young Carer Bursary, but only **27%** receiving it, in the same years that **76%** say their grades are affected.

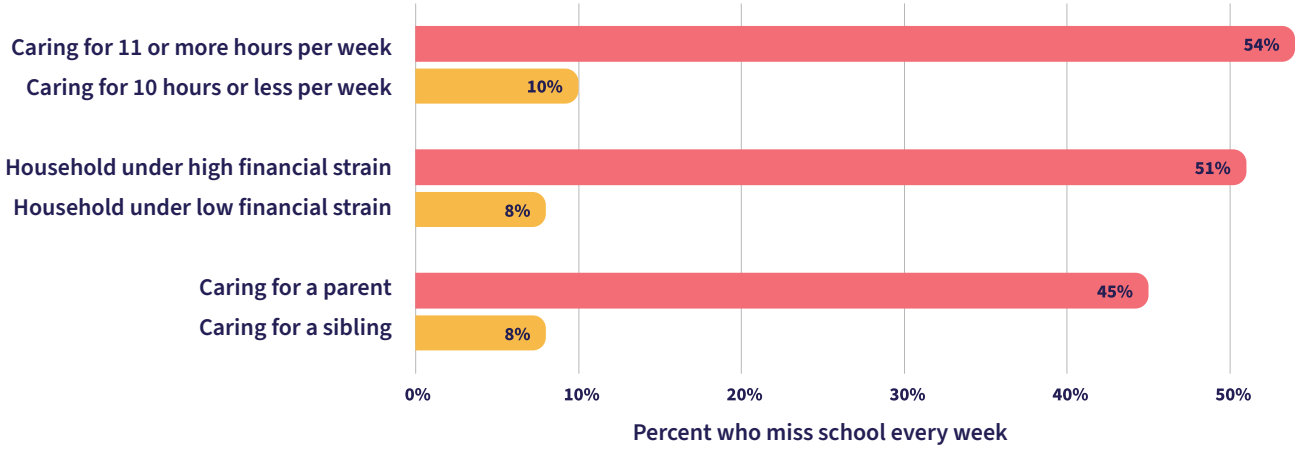
Parents and family are the main way Young Carers hear about services, yet parents are far less aware of Young Carer-specific supports. When Young Carers answered for themselves, **46%** knew about the Bursary; when parents answered, around **20%** did.

14% of those who answered could not say what support would help, suggesting many families do not know what is possible.

"Literally anything to make it easier to understand what support exists and how to access it." - Young Carer, 18 to 25

Who carries the most

Some Young Carers are far more likely to miss school every week, particularly those with heavier caring responsibilities, greater financial strain or those caring for a parent.



Greater impact with more hours

Impact rises sharply once caring exceeds 10 hours a week. Young Carers caring 11 or more hours are around three times as likely to feel sad (43% vs 13%) or isolated (44% vs 14%), and are also more likely to report family money worries (75% vs 42%).

Caring for a parent

Young Carers caring for a parent are more likely to miss school, consider leaving study (29% compared with 6%) and live with family money worries (69% compared with 44%). The number of Young Carers caring for a parent has also grown, from 34% in 2025 to 45% in 2026.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young Carers

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young Carers were the most financially affected group. 72% said their family went without something important, compared with 43% of other Young Carers, and 59% experienced bullying or another negative experience, compared with 36%.

Other groups to watch:

Those living with **their own disability or chronic illness** report higher rates of mental health challenges (88% vs 71%). This is a smaller group, so it is an early signal.

Regional Young Carers report more mental health challenges than those in major cities (80% vs 64%) and are more likely to face transport and distance barriers to support.

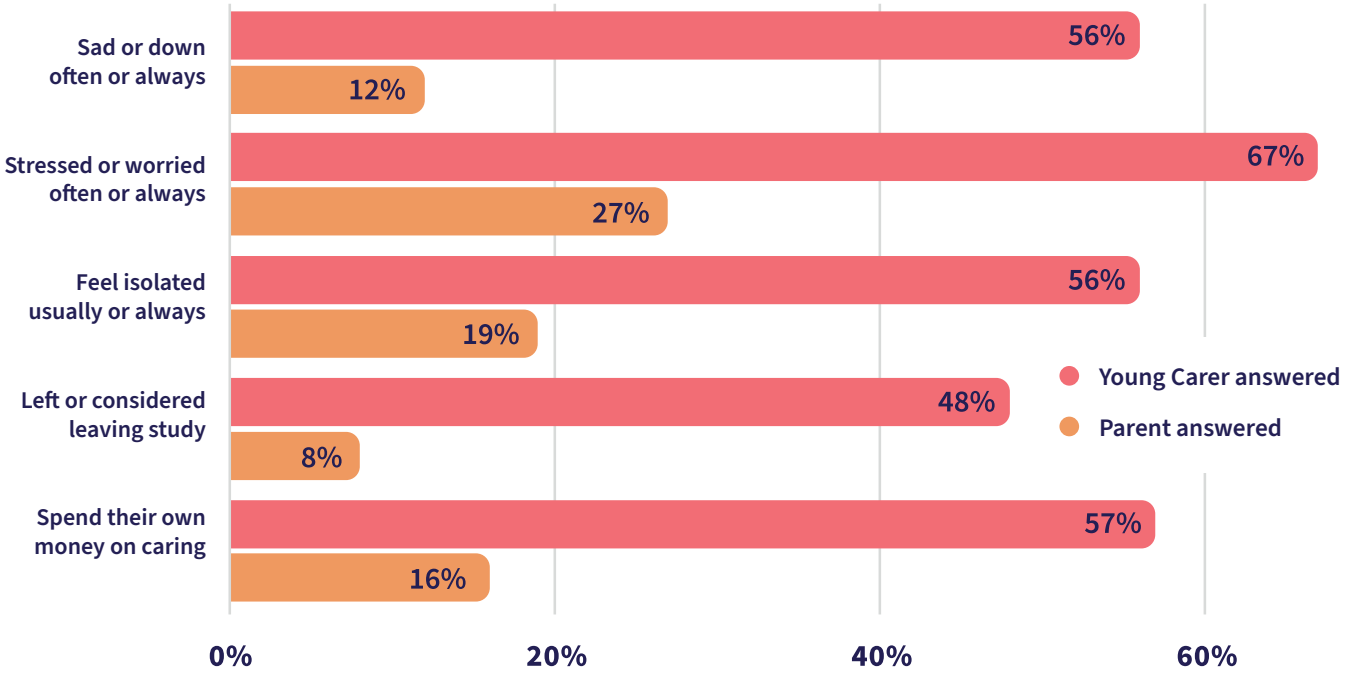
Young women report much higher stress than young men (52% compared with 28%), and are more likely to provide personal care.

"We cancel trips to visit family because we can't afford it, we cancel therapy sessions because we can't afford it."

- Young Carer aged 15 to 17, answered with a parent.

Hearing from Young Carers directly

When Young Carers answer for themselves, they describe a heavier experience than when a parent answers for them, even at the same age.



The same pattern appeared in our 2025 survey.

This is not a criticism of parents, who are often carrying a great deal themselves. Young Carers frequently protect the people they love by keeping their own worries quiet, and some impacts, such as isolation at school, happen out of sight.

What it tells us is that Young Carers need to be asked directly, in ways that feel safe, if we are to understand and meet their needs.

> *"I don't talk to my friends about it because I don't want them to know about what's going on with my dad and his mental health."* - Young Carer aged 11 to 14, answered with a parent

How experiences change with age

The caring role grows heavier and more adult with age, school pressure peaks at 15 to 17, and financial responsibility peaks at 18 to 25.

% of Young Carers who...	Age 4 to 10	Age 11 to 14	Age 15 to 17	Age 18 to 25
Manage medication	8%	21%	23%	50%
Recognised later than they started caring	32%	37%	51%	61%
Miss school time every week	30%	46%	55%	50%*
Grades affected	41%	57%	76%	57%*
Left or considered leaving study	7%	24%	31%	57%*
Missed most or all social events last month	18%	35%	15%	20%
Often or always tired because of caring	18%	32%	17%	50%
Family usually or always worries about money	43%	64%	65%	70%
Spend their own money on caring	10%	33%	46%	86%
Know about the Young Carer Bursary	6%	29%	56%	61%
Say caring affects their life "a lot"	22%	25%	38%	52%

*Based on the small number of 18 to 25 year olds still studying.

Three stages of caring

AGES 4 TO 10

Most care for a sibling, with emotional support central to the role (86%). Awareness of supports is lowest, with just 6% knowing about the Bursary, which is available from age 12.

AGES 11 TO 14

Missed social events peak, school attendance drops, and family money worry jumps from 43% to 64%.

AGES 15 TO 25

Grades suffer most, more consider leaving study, more care for a parent, and spending their own money on caring increases with age. Many have cared for years before being recognised.

"Being able to juggle caring, studying and my own mental health all at once."

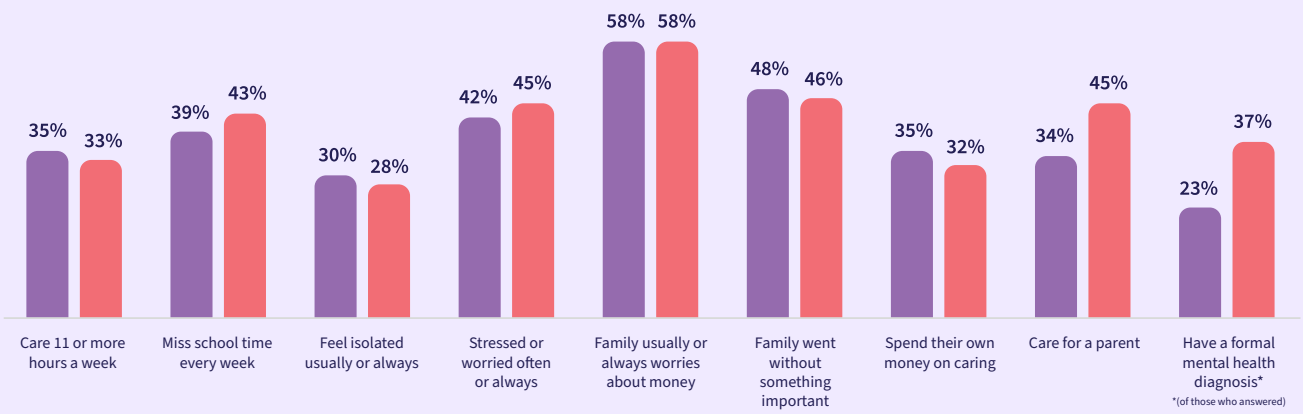
- Young Carer aged 11 to 14

What has changed since 2025

The pressures on Young Carers have not eased. Comparing 2025 and 2026 like for like, school absence, isolation, stress and financial pressure are all at the same level, and the key patterns in this report appeared in both years.

Key experiences of Young Carers, 2025 vs 2026

Percentage of Young Carers



Little Dreamers assistance was rated 4 or 5 out of 5

2025	2026
81%	89%

- More Young Carers are caring for a parent, the group that carries the heaviest school and financial load.
- More have a formal mental health diagnosis. The share reporting mental health challenges is similar, so this may reflect more young people being assessed rather than more distress.
- More Young Carers rate Little Dreamers highly.

What has not changed: in both years, financial strain, caring for a parent and caring longer hours go hand in hand with missing school, and Young Carers describe a heavier load than their parents see.

Note: 2025 figures in this report have been recalculated using the same method as 2026 (the share of people who answered each question), so they differ from figures in our 2025 summary. Some questions changed between years and are not compared here.

In their own words

We asked three open questions as part of the Survey: what is the hardest thing about being a Young Carer, what is the best thing, and what support do you wish existed. More than **200 Young Carers and families** answered each of the first two.

THE HARDEST THING

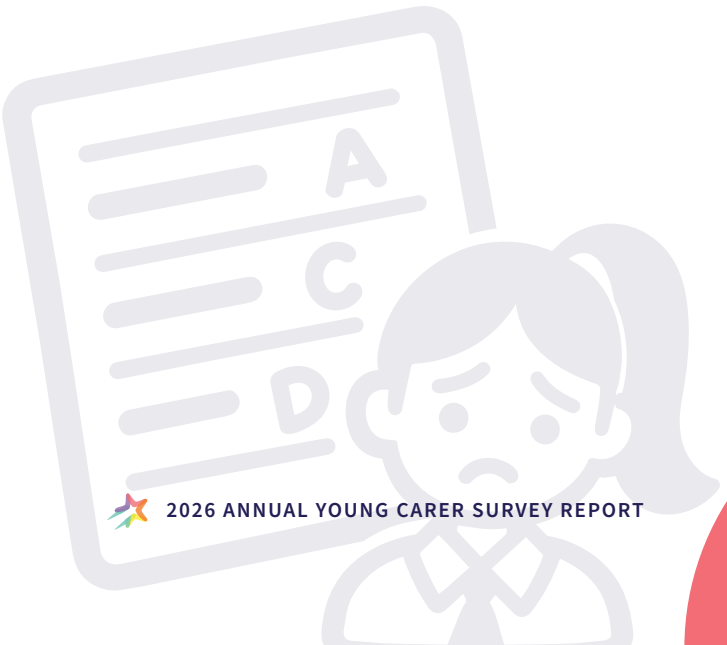
Most common themes	Share of answers
Stress, worry and exhaustion	26%
Missing out on activities, friends and a normal life	22%
Not being understood, feeling invisible or alone	17%
Responsibility and growing up too fast	13%
Getting less attention and always coming second	12%
Watching the person they care for struggle	11%

"There are times I just want to be a kid but I need to make sure my mum's ok."
- Young Carer aged 11 to 14, answered with a parent

"Having to leave fun activities because my brother isn't coping or able to stay."
- Parent of a Young Carer aged 4 to 10

"Seeing my mum cry."
- Young Carer, 11 to 14

"Not knowing what's going to happen the next day."
- Parent of a Young Carer aged 18 to 25



THE BEST THING

Most common themes	Share of answers
Helping and making a difference	42%
Love and closeness with family	37%
Personal growth: empathy, maturity and skills	18%
Connection with other Young Carers	10%
Feeling valued and trusted	9%

As Young Carers grow older, the best thing shifts from closeness with family to what caring has taught them. **Personal growth** is named by **10%** of 4 to 10 year olds and **more than half** of 18 to 25 year olds.

> *"I have learnt a lot about patience, kindness and what it means to be a good listener. I think I have become a better person because of my caring role."* - Young Carer, 18 to 25

> *"Growing up faster, opportunities for advocacy, greater empathy and understanding, meeting other incredible carers."* - Young Carer, 18 to 25

> *"I get to see the new thing my brother does that no one thought he would ever do."* - Parent of a Young Carer aged 4 to 10

> *"I can make sure mummy is ok, I can hug her and love her whenever I want."* - Young Carer aged 4 to 10, answered with a parent

THE SUPPORT THEY WISH EXISTED

Most common requests	Share of suggestions
Holiday programs, camps and outings	41%
School and tutoring support	23%
Financial and material help	21%
Peer groups and connection with other Young Carers	19%
Support closer to home, especially in regional areas	16%
Respite and breaks	14%

Requests for support suited to their age come mostly from older Young Carers, who feel they have outgrown programs designed for younger children.

> *"Targeted holiday programs that suit 15-17 year olds. I don't attend anymore as they're for young kids and movies only for 18+."* - Parent of a Young Carer

> *"Groups for kids my age to talk so you are not alone."* - Young Carer, 11 to 14

> *"Respite at short notice."*
> - Parent of a Young Carer

> *"Recognition of young carers in state primary schools. In person young carer programs for primary age children."* - Parent of a Young Carer

Little Dreamers programs

Young Carers and families who take part in Little Dreamers programs value them highly.

89% rate their Little Dreamers experience 4 or 5 out of 5, up from 81% in 2025.

55% say our programs have made a lot or a huge difference to their lives. This rises to 68% when Young Carers answer for themselves.

Holiday Programs are the most attended, followed by Peer Support, Tutoring and Overnight Camps.

Half of respondents asked us to follow up with them for more support, a clear sign of unmet need.

Young Carers also told us what they want more of:

Holiday Programs and Camps, Peer Connection, Tutoring, programs designed for older Young Carers, and support closer to home in regional areas. These insights will shape how we design and deliver our programs in the year ahead.

Their hopes for the future:

Better health for their family (**75%**) and financial security (**65%**, rising to **88%** for 15 to 17 year olds).

> *"Getting to share my story with others that relate and also have a stronger connection with who I care for."*
>
> **- Young Carer, 15 to 17**

> *"Knowing there is a whole community out there to support me and my family."* **- Young Carer, 11 to 14**

What needs to change

Young Carers have told us clearly what would make a difference, and each of our **calls to action below** is grounded in what they shared.

For governments

1. Identify Young Carers early, starting in primary school: Build Young Carer identification into school enrolment and wellbeing processes, supported by a dedicated Young Carer contact in every school. Caring starts at about age 8, yet schools identify only 8% of Young Carers.
2. Put financial support directly into Young Carers' hands: Expand the reach of the Young Carer Bursary and provide emergency relief for essentials, with particular focus on 15 to 25 year olds. 46% of families went without; only 27% of 15 to 17 year olds receive the Bursary, though 56% know about it.
3. Recognise caring hours as a risk factor: Use 10 or more hours of caring a week as a trigger for proactive support in assessments and services. Above 10 hours, weekly school absence rises from 10% to 54%.
4. Make mental health support affordable and carer-aware: Create priority, low-cost pathways for Young Carers in youth mental health services. Cost is the biggest barrier (46%), and nearly 1 in 4 have no support at all.
5. Count Young Carers and hear from them directly: Include a Young Carer identifier in national data collections, and ask Young Carers themselves, not only their parents. At 11 to 14, Young Carers report more than four times the level of sadness their parents report for them.
6. Invest in culturally safe, community-led support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young Carers: 72% of their families went without something important.

For schools, TAFEs and universities

- Recognise and record Young Carers, and train staff to understand the caring role: 1 in 3 students have experienced bullying or another negative experience at school.
- Offer flexible attendance and assessment early, before Young Carers fall behind, with extra support in the senior years: 76% of 15 to 17 year olds say their grades are affected.

For services and the community sector

- Reach parents and families with clear information about Young Carer-specific supports: Parents are the main source of information, but know least about these supports.
- Design support for older Young Carers aged 15 to 25, and bring more support closer to home in regional areas.
- Offer additional respite and time out, including providing additional access to emergency respite options for Young Carers.

About this report

How we analysed the data

- Who was included: 388 responses were received. We removed responses flagged by our quality checks, responses from people who were neither a Young Carer nor their parent or guardian, and responses from former Young Carers now over 25, leaving 355.
- Percentages are based on those who answered each question. Partial responses are included for the questions answered.
- Age groups: 4 to 6 year olds are combined with 7 to 10 year olds because of small numbers.
- Testing differences: differences between groups were tested statistically (chi-square tests). Findings described as early signals are based on smaller groups and should be read with care.
- Age started caring and age first recognised were asked in age bands, so averages use the midpoint of each band. Because answers in the same band count as no gap, the true gap is likely longer.
- Financial strain combines five indicators: frequent money worry, going without, spending their own money on caring, needing basic items, and moving house. High strain means three or more.
- Knowing about a support includes anyone who said they knew about it or were receiving it.
- Regional analysis matched postcodes to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Remoteness Areas. Very few respondents live in remote areas, so findings describe regional rather than remote experience.
- Open answers were read in full and grouped into themes developed from the responses themselves.
- Comparisons with 2025 use the same method for both years and only include questions asked in a comparable way.

Privacy

All responses are confidential. No names or identifying details appear in this report. Quotes are shared anonymously.

Thank you

Thank you to every Young Carer, parent and guardian who took the time to share their experiences with us. Your honesty makes this report possible, and your voices will shape our work and our advocacy in the year ahead.

Contact us

To find out more, or to talk with us about this report, contact Little Dreamers at info@littledreamers.org.au or 1800 717 515, or visit littledreamers.org.au.

LITTLE DREAMERS

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