

# Christmas can be isolating for young carers – they need time to be children

December 21 2018, by Jo Aldridge

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Most children look forward to the Christmas holidays as a time for fun and families. But for some young carers – children who provide care for someone in their family who is ill or disabled – the Christmas holidays are a mixed blessing.

Dani (names have been changed to protect anonymity) is one such young carer who I worked with as part of recent [research](#). She is 14 and cares for her mum who has Multiple Sclerosis and depression. Dani does most of the cooking and cleaning in the house as well as shopping and managing the [family](#) finances.

She also spends time with her mum trying to keep her spirits up and making sure she takes her medication. This means Dani has little, if any, time for socialising. Her mother's condition also means Dani is sometimes too worried about leaving her mum at home alone to go out with friends, even though her mum would like her to.

Christmas is going to be both good and bad for Dani and her mum. It means Dani spends time with her mum at home and doesn't have to worry about her as much because they are together. But it also means she has to do a lot more around the house when her mum is too ill to do it, such as cooking, wrapping presents and making sure Christmas is a happy time for them both.

## **Unrecognised support**

For [children](#) like Dani, the Christmas holidays can be an emotional time and bring extra challenges. It's particularly hard if they are having to provide [care](#) unrecognised and unsupported, when other [family members](#) or friends are not able or available to help, or support services are missing.

This can make caring a lonely and isolating experience for some children. Many of them also have to provide the sort of care we would normally associate with an adult – toileting and bathing a loved one, administering medication, cooking and cleaning, as well as having to look after [younger siblings](#).

Some children also help care for a parent, or other relative, who has [mental health problems](#), or substance misuse issues, or both mental and physical health conditions. A [new children's book](#) I wrote aims to explain what it's like being a young carer.

Estimates of the number of children across the UK who provide informal care in families range from [166,000](#) to [700,000](#). The discrepancy in the figures is because definitions used by researchers to describe young carers lack consistency and different methods are used to identify and investigate their experiences.

But it's also because some children are [wary of disclosing](#) the fact that they are caring for a family member for fear of interventions by health or social services that may lead to family separations. This means that some children are caring unrecognised, unsupported and often with very little knowledge or understanding about the condition, and prognosis, of the person they are caring for.

## Getting help early

For some young carers, the amount of care they provide at home can [seriously affect their education](#), their social and family lives, and their chances of a happy future that is free from caring. For others, caring can be a [rewarding experience](#), but this is more likely to be the case when they and their families are supported by consistent and good quality health and social care services.

Ten years of austerity [have eroded](#) both the availability and quality of those services. In these cases, it's children and families that suffer the most. A [briefing](#) from the Children's Society charity suggests that the introduction of Universal Credit and the abolition of the [severe disability premium](#) will put more pressure on children to take on extra caring responsibilities at home.

Evidence shows that children who provide care unrecognised and unsupported are [more likely to experience](#) low self-esteem, as well as poor education outcomes and difficult transitions in adulthood. Early interventions are needed that identify young carers before it becomes just a regular part of child's everyday life.

Providing support to the [whole family](#) is key to ensuring children do not provide inappropriate levels of care that have a detrimental impact on their lives and the life of the person they're caring for. Thanks to the 2014 Care Act, young carers now have a right to an assessment of their needs alongside the person they are caring for. Yet, a study by the Children's Commission in 2016 found that [four out of five young carers](#) still receive no support.

Young carers like Dani need recognition and support, and they need this both for themselves and for the person they care for. They also need opportunities just to be children, to have fun and enjoy being with their families. At no time is this more true than at Christmas.

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