



Ethics, Young Carers and the Rights of the Child

Laraine Toms, President of Carers NSW

In May, Carers NSW together with partners St James Ethics Centre who conducted the research, and Macquarie Group Foundation who supported the work, released the report we have all been working on for two years: *The Ethics of Caring in a Good Society: a national conversation*.

This project was initiated by Carers NSW because we knew that Australians were facing a crisis in caring. More people needing care, fewer family members able or willing to care. We asked what ethical challenges might we as a society face in attempting to meet the needs of both those who need care and those individuals, groups, institutions, professionals and government sectors who are involved in the caring for our citizens, in particular those who are vulnerable and/or disadvantaged? For two years St James Ethics Centre independent researchers conducted focus groups, surveys, discussion papers and an online survey to find out what Australians in all their diversity and all around the country thought about ethics and caring.

You can read this report on our website, www.carersnsw.asn.au Go to *What's New* and click on *The Ethics of Caring in a Good Society: a national conversation*.

Four key questions were asked: What is a good society? What is caring? Who is responsible for caring? What does caring look like in a good society? Many other questions and issues arose during the national conversation and are still being talked about. The conversation continues, as we hoped it would. One of those issues is whether it is right that our society expects young people, including children under 18, to care for their parents or siblings. We know these young people as Young Carers.

After a recent interview with Richard Fidler of the ABC and a Young Carer from Queensland which raised ethical issues around young carers, I received a letter from a Family Law solicitor, Elizabeth Pemberton which highlighted some of the ethical dilemmas. She said:

'I heard the interview with the Young Carer on Richard Fidler's "Conversations" on ABC Local Radio ... Instead

of being filled with admiration for this nineteen year old, who has cared for her sick mother since she was aged 12, I was appalled. I could not listen to it. I had to turn it off. Later I listened to the interview in full, and I was still horror-struck ... this young carer single-handedly attends to the day to day care of her mother, as well as managing their household, as well as going to school, and more recently, university... she spoke of "the hugest thing" being the need for her to look after her mother's psychological wellbeing. She spoke of loving her mother very much.

Whereas mankind owes to the child the best it has to give ... Declaration of the Rights of the Child

The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity. In the enactment of laws for this purpose, the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration.

Principle 2, Declaration of the Rights of the Child

The young carer was impressive in her devotion to her mother, and outstanding in her high degree of commitment to her role as a primary carer. She did acknowledge that young carers live constantly in a state

of survival and that every day is a battle for every young carer. As I listened to all this, I was grief-stricken ... I ached to hear a young person who was being deprived of being just that, 'a young person'. Does that matter?

... I have to acknowledge that each situation has to be considered individually but I pose the general principle: that children and young persons have essential needs which are incompatible with being a primary carer for a sick or disabled relative.'



Elizabeth asked what we, Carers NSW, planned to do about the situation. Others have asked why we appear to support the concept of Young Carers.

We do not believe the rights of the child as expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child as Proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 1386(XIV) of 20 November 1959 should be ignored. We deplore the fact that so many Young Carers sacrifice so much, yet respect and admire their readiness to do so. We know how much these young people love their cared for family member. At the same time we know that as a society we have not provided these young people and their families with real choices – a key theme echoed in the *The Ethics of Caring in a Good Society: a national conversation* report. Until real choice and support is provided to Young Carers, Carers NSW will continue to do all we can to support them in their caring role. At the same time we will continue to advocate for adequate services and real choices so that young people will be able to be young people and have access to education, a social life and employment opportunities open to other Australians.

For more information, ideas and research on ethics, visit the St James Ethics Centre website at www.ethics.org.au

To read *The Ethics of Caring in a Good Society: a national conversation* report, go to www.carersnsw.asn.au

The Young Carer Program at Carers NSW was developed to make a positive difference to the lives of young carers (25 years and under) and their families.

The aims of the Young Carer Program are:

- To promote awareness of the issues and needs of young carers through statewide programs
- To support young carers to complete secondary education
- To provide information and referrals to services / support / counselling for young carers and their families
- To develop a young carer support network in partnership with relevant agencies, services and schools

How does the program support young carers?

- Camps (8–12 years, 13–17 years)
- Wellbeing retreats for young adult carers (18–25 years)
- Quarterly newsletter for young carers
- Monthly e-newsletters for service providers
- Talk-link (Telephone group counselling)
- Face-to-face counselling
- Telephone support/information/referrals
- Interactive young carer website
- Development of regional networks
- Community awareness and education

The Young Carer Program is funded by the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care and the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

An Advisory Committee guides the program.

Contact the program by calling **1800 242 636*** or go to www.youngcarersnsw.asn.au

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