WeCare! – Young Carer School Ambassadors

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Aims:
Supporting and training the WeCare! ambassador team to address schools, highlighting the existence of Young Carers, the impact of caring, and connecting teachers to available supports and services. Additionally, the program will promote and create a safe place for young carers to connect within their schools.

Abstract:
An estimated two Young Carers exist in each Australian classroom (Moore, Morrow, McArthur, Noble-Carr & Gray, 2006) however most remain ‘hidden’. Reports published after consultations with Young Carers, confirm the need for recognition and understanding, however a significant number did not advocate for preferential treatment from teachers (Barry, 2011). Many Young Carers do not identify with the term ‘young carer’, instead seeing their role as a normal part of family obligations (Cass, Brennan, Thomson, Hall, Purcal, Hamilton and Adamson, 2011). Others prefer not to identify their role fearing possible stigma, further marginalisation or possible child protection concerns (Cass et al, 2011).

The WeCare! Young Carer group meet regularly at the Carer Retreat to network with other Young Carers and to talk with trusted adults about their concerns (Hutchinson, Roberts & Kurrle, 2014). WeCare! Central Coast Counsellors facilitate the events, working with Young Carers to develop strategies for building self-esteem and resilience through creative therapies.

An outcome of one meeting, where participants raised their frustration with the lack of understanding from teachers, was the formation of the WeCare! school ambassador program. Three Young Carers created a presentation to challenge teachers to connect with young carers in their school. Key messages: Young Carers exist in your classroom; each Young Carer has a story; consider the impacts of caring; and importantly arming the teachers with information regarding services & supports.

It is clear these young people are proud of their self-sufficiency, maturity and accomplishment (Moore et al, 2006). The WeCare! school ambassadors have presented to over 220 teachers, sharing their capacity to respect, accept difference and feel empathy for others (Cass et al, 2011). One Young Carer reported – “I didn’t think I could do it, especially at my school, but the teachers were great!”

Background:
Young Carers living on the Central Coast are offered a safe place to meet, have fun and develop their skills and artistic talents on a bi-monthly basis at the Carer Retreat at Gosford Hospital. WeCare! Central Coast Counsellors facilitate the events, working with Young Carers to develop strategies for building self-esteem and resilience through creative therapies.

It was during one of these occasions that several of the young people began a discussion about the attitude of teachers in their school about their caring responsibilities. Several said they felt isolated by their role, that they were the only one in their school with caring responsibilities. Others suggested that “this is just the way it is” in our family and that their additional responsibilities were a normal aspect of their family (Cass et al, 2011). The discussion diverted to ideas that created a positive difference to their health and wellbeing, such
as the opportunity to attend events with other Young Carers or personal strategies to deal with negative feelings. Very quickly others in the group identified with the challenges and together they brainstormed solutions. As a result three Young Carers, who attending the same school, made the commitment to do something about creating positive change within their school.

Many Young Carers feel invisible and unsupported in schools however, they enjoy school as a place to escape the demands of their caring role. Achieving the opportunity to be heard and supported within an environment where they spend a major part of their lives, has the potential toward less isolation, greater inclusion and greater growth for each carer as a valued and contributing member of their school, community and family.

With the support of WeCare! Central Coast the Young Carers created an interactive presentation that told snippets of their story and highlighted local carer statistics and available services. The aim was to create greater awareness and recognition of Young Carers within the school environment. The key messages were Young Carers exist in your classroom; each Young Carer has their own story; suggested that teachers need to consider the impacts of caring; and importantly arming the teachers with information regarding services & supports.

As well as the presentation the school ambassadors developed an information package for teachers that included promotional stickers and posters for use within the school. The anticipated outcome was that teachers would be moved to promote the existence of Young Carer supports across the school environment using the resources contained in the package.

Over a four month period in late 2014 the ambassadors presented to over 200 teachers in five local schools including their own. However the process of booking the sessions within the schools was surprisingly difficult. It was thought that an approach to the head teachers of welfare was the most appropriate first contact as it was assumed that their knowledge of the existence of Young Carers in their school would be more attuned than a regular class teacher or in fact the principal. This assumption was true for the most part however it was astonishing to hear from several that they “don’t have any young carers in the school” so it was felt that the presentation was not required. Those who rejected the session booking were sent the information package in the hope they would change their attitude and make contact and negotiate a booking. None of the schools did.

Outcomes:
An evaluation form was made available to all teachers who attended the ambassador presentation with an average 50% response rate. Feedback was very positive with 100% reporting a heightened awareness of Young Carers in their classes – “I had never thought about this before today” and a commitment to action in the provision of better support for Young Carers. Further several schools are considering identification of carers at enrolment, and are interested in developing a school based support group for Young Carers.

The Young Carers reported an increase in self-sufficiency, maturity and sense of accomplishment. Building on their expressed capacity to respect, accept difference and feel empathy for others (Cass et al, 2011) the youngsters gained confidence in their communication skills and the knowing that they really did have something significant to contribute to the school community. One young carer reported – “I didn’t think I could do it, especially at my school, but the teachers were great!”
As a result of this experience one of the ambassadors was nominated and selected for the 2015 Steel Magnolia, Young Achiever Award. An award she attributes to her work in local schools as well as the development of the YC support group in her own school. Two of the members of the WeCare weekend group were successful in their application for a Young Carer Bursary to support the costs of their education. Another gained entry into the Carers NSW Leadership program for 2015 and is keen to share her newly developed skills with others.

Conclusion:
This project resulted in obvious benefits for all participants including greater awareness and action by teachers to identify and support Young Carers in local schools and increased self-confidence and sense of accomplishment.

Two of the three ambassadors are in their HSC year and are finding the juggle of school, part-time work and their caring role all-encompassing with little time left to negotiate school based ambassador sessions. The We Care! Central Coast counsellors hope to recruit additional ambassadors to assist with the provision of sessions in 2015, perhaps to a larger audience of teachers for the region such as principal or counsellors meetings.

References:

