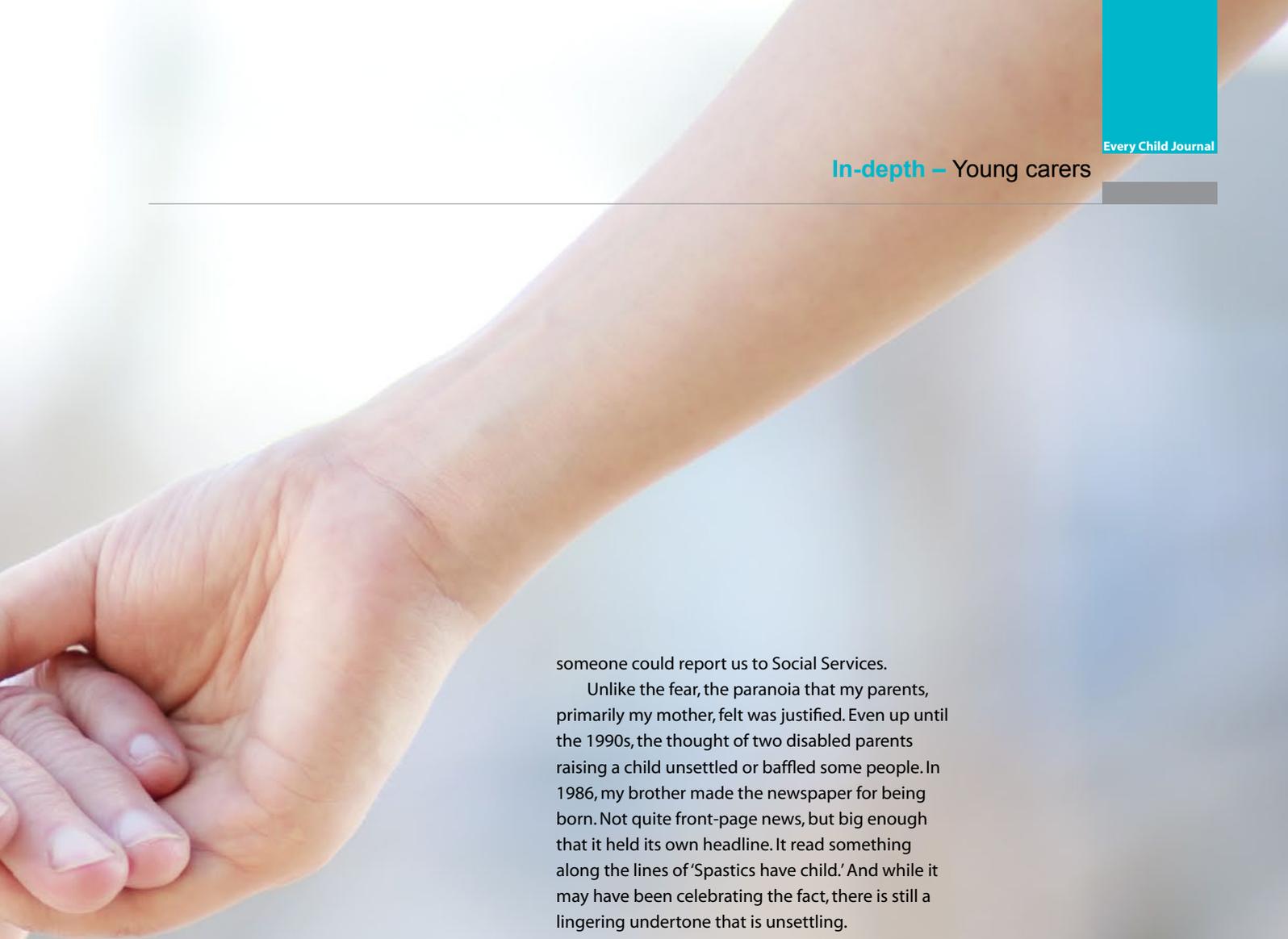


The experiences of a young carer

Until recently, little attention was paid to young carers in schools. **Joshua Francis** gives us a moving personal account of what it means to be a young carer and how the professionals can help ease the burden.

My brother was a carer before me, but when he left home, I became the primary care giver to two disabled parents. Luckily, my parents remained relatively independent despite having Cerebral Palsy, which meant that both were wheelchair users.

My parents strove to ensure my childhood was as 'normal' as possible. Mum would set out to my primary school extra early to ensure she could be there at 3:30, we would often have days out at the cinema, and, if I wanted, Dad would take me to the park on his days off from work.



As for the actual caring aspect, I helped get dinner ready, clean and generally do little chores. My 'workload' pales in significance to the help a lot of young carers in Britain provide. However, I did feel very alone during my childhood.

I was afraid of discussing my carer status in case I was mocked by the other children, or worse, taken from my home. This second reason was a big fear of mine; it was so bad, I never felt safe in my own home.

Dreading a knock at the door

The fear was most prevalent whenever there was a knock at the door. Even today, a door knock will bring back memories of scrabbling to find a hiding place beneath the cushions on the sofa. My heart would pound so hard that I could feel it reverberate around my body. I would hesitantly look towards the door at a black shifting shadow on the other side of the frosted glass. I would silently and endlessly repeat phrases like 'please go' and 'leave us alone' or command it to go away.

My mother would often be sat nearby beneath a similar cloud of dread. Looking back now, it seems ludicrous and, nine times out of ten, we would have been hiding from meter-men or catalogue salesmen. But that didn't matter; the fear felt real and stemmed from my parents' paranoia about the possibility that

someone could report us to Social Services.

Unlike the fear, the paranoia that my parents, primarily my mother, felt was justified. Even up until the 1990s, the thought of two disabled parents raising a child unsettled or baffled some people. In 1986, my brother made the newspaper for being born. Not quite front-page news, but big enough that it held its own headline. It read something along the lines of 'Spastics have child.' And while it may have been celebrating the fact, there is still a lingering undertone that is unsettling.

Even worse was the reaction of some people close to my parents when my brother was about to be born. Close family members questioned whether my parents had completely thought about their suitability to have children and whether they could cope. It seems startling to think that only 27 years ago, many people in society still found it weird that disabled people would, or even could, have children.

While the idea that two disabled parents would be incapable of raising a family was invalid, the effect it had was not. It sowed distrust in other people. We were constantly wondering: would they go so far as to report us to social services? Although this paranoia may seem unreasonable, we were at one point reported.

On the day that social services came to visit, I experienced a strange mix of feelings. Part of me was worried sick that my worst fears were coming true and that I would be pulled from my home. The other part of me felt as though I was defending my home by giving the best impression. It clearly worked too as they found no issues with the parenting on display.

I remember how the social worker took me aside to ask questions in private. She ended by saying I seemed very happy and asked if there was anything that needed addressing. I'm not sure she was expecting my response of 'well, we could do with getting a dog!'

Carer groups and support

At the time, I was happy to see the back of professionals, but looking back I can see an opportunity missed. While there was no need for help concerning my home life, I should have mentioned how I felt alone as a carer and asked what support was available.

I wonder now why the social worker didn't mention possible help or carer groups to me. If only one of us had asked for some form of carer group or support, even some information about how many carers they were. But we didn't, and she never came back with a dog either.

It was only much later in my life that I found out carer groups existed, and later still that

I may have been entitled to some form of carer support. At the time, the internet was not so resourceful and we had no computer at home; another thing people younger than me would struggle to understand. Carer groups would have been especially useful to me as they would have allowed me to feel safe discussing and sharing stories without fear.

At school, no teacher, assistant or tutor ever mentioned my situation other than arranging accessible rooms for parents evening. The usual reaction was a knowing look or a sympathetic smile. In one way, it is nice to be treated as any other student, but without any mention, it felt like my life was meant to be kept hidden.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), nearly a quarter of a million people under the age of 19 were providing care to a close relative in 2011.¹ My school contained over 700 students and each class around 30 students; I find it hard to believe that I never passed another young carer in the hall. But if I did, I was not aware, and I went through my entire childhood thinking I was alone.



Underachievement

If I had been able to identify other carers, or even talked with a teacher with carer experience, I could have become more open. This would have greatly helped my confidence too and, in turn, my education. Reflecting upon my grades at high school, I can see that I was capable of achieving much more. Yet I remained too timid to give answers, seek help or push my work further. I was lucky that I attained grades good enough to attend university, where I graduated with a first class honours degree.

The ONS find that lower attainment and attendance are common among young carers in education. I believe a big factor for this is that many carers are naturally withdrawn, as I was. We don't want to seek help, nor stand out, in case we attract unwanted attention. It is a stereotype of the British that we sweep uncomfortable situations under the carpet, but our society suffers as a result.

To break this cycle, carers need to be reminded that caring is not shameful, and that many people do it.

Connect young carers

I grew up without easy access to the internet which didn't help my situation. But carers now have a resource for finding more about their status and take solace in not being a rarity. There are forums where stories can be shared and friends made online. However, there is no substitute for meeting in person. Schools and communities need to do more to connect young carers and give them a chance to support one another.



Joshua and his parents

It is unfair to say though that there are no existing groups or programmes – it varies by county. While I studied at the University of Winchester, I discovered that Hampshire has an amazing support network for young carers.

I became involved in my university's **Higher Education Ambassador Programme** as part of their ex-carer team. I was able to visit local young carer groups as an example of a carer who made it to higher education. Some of these children were as young as four or five and had many more responsibilities than I had at that age.

But what they did have was interaction with others in similar situations. These groups gave them a chance to open up and, of course, there was also a lot of running and playing games. If the group met for a few hours a week, that gave them a few hours to enjoy being children without worrying about being questioned or shunned.

These solutions are simple, but they can make a difference. They allow a carer to find others like them and a sense of belonging. It gives them a life away from carer responsibilities and may even show them a life beyond caring.

Joshua Francis is a creative writing graduate from the University of Winchester. Since graduating, he has become a freelance copy writer and article writer.

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