PUNISHED FOR CARING

Suspensions, Exclusions, and the Young Carer Crisis

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MYTIME YOUNG CARERS

CHARITY AWARDS 2025 WINNER

This report is designed with the intention of being as accessible and reader friendly as possible. With this is mind, we have utilised the following tools to aid in navigation and usability:

- The report as a whole is broken down into 3 sections with coloured page edges as shown in the contents page

- All data is colour-coded using the key on the right

- All references can be found at the end of the report to minimise visual interference within the report itself

DATA NAVIGATION

Young carers

Non-young carers

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Charity Number: 1211980

PURPOSE

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by young carers within England's mainstream education system, with a particular focus on the disproportionately high rates of suspensions, permanent exclusions, and referrals to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). Drawing comparisons with their non-caring peers, the report highlights the systemic barriers that contribute to disengagement and disrupted learning among young carers.

Through a data-informed lens and lived experience insights, the report seeks to raise awareness of the educational inequalities young carers face and to support a more inclusive, responsive approach across schools and education policy.

This report is intended for:

- Educators and school leaders seeking to improve outcomes for vulnerable learners
- Policymakers working in education and social justice
- Practitioners across youth services, social care, and health who support young carers or at-risk students

By shining a light on the intersection between caring responsibilities and school disengagement, this report aims to inform better practice, promote early intervention, and support system-level change to prevent avoidable exclusion and lost learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Who are young carers?

A young carer is legally defined in section 96 of the Children and Families Act 2014 as 'a person under the age of 18 who provides or intends to provide care for another person'. [1] Therefore, young carers are children who provide care for someone or multiple people with unmet care needs, relating to ill health and / or disability. Young carers may be caring for one or multiple people in their family, including those who may not live in the same household.

MYTIME Young Carers

MYTIME Young Carers is a national charity founded in Dorset, committed to reducing the negative impacts of caring responsibilities and improving long-term outcomes for young carers. The charity's Level Up Programme aims to enhance the educational outcomes of young carers by equipping schools with the necessary training, tools, resources, and strategies to create supportive and inclusive environments. The Level Up Academy, led by Shakira Bryan, offers the same support but through online learning platforms, webinars, virtual and remote tools across the whole of the UK.

By addressing the unique challenges young carers face in education, the programme helps ensure they receive the support they need, enabling them to thrive and reach their full potential. This initiative directly aligns with the study's focus on understanding the impact of exclusions, suspensions, and Alternative Provision referrals on young carers' academic achievement and long-term life outcomes.

Scope of the report

This report presents a multi-layered analysis of exclusion trends and the use of Alternative Provision across England over the past three academic years, with a particular focus on the experiences of young carers.

The study spans both primary and secondary age groups and draws on a wide range of data sources to ensure a robust and comprehensive evidence base. These include quantitative data (such as national exclusion statistics and school-level metrics), qualitative data (including open-ended survey responses, interviews, and case studies), and first-hand accounts from young people and professionals. Narrative quotes, lived experiences, and professional perspectives have been used to amplify voices often underrepresented in formal reporting, and to provide a nuanced understanding of practice on the ground.

While there is a growing body of research examining suspensions, permanent exclusions, and the broader landscape of alternative provision in England, this report represents a first-of-its-kind exploration into the specific (and often overlooked) link between caring responsibilities and referrals to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). Previous studies have highlighted the disproportionate rates of exclusion among young carers; however, there has been little dedicated research investigating how and why young carers may be diverted into PRUs, what their experiences in these settings are, and the long-term implications of this trajectory. This report seeks to fill that gap.

Crucially, the report integrates insights from a range of educational contexts, including multiple PRUs. Because PRU cohorts are fluid and transitional, with pupils potentially reintegrated into mainstream education, moved into specialist settings, or attending short-term interventions, defining a fixed cohort size for this study was not feasible. Instead, the report prioritises thematic analysis and recurring patterns observed across the landscape of alternative provision.

Contributions were gathered from a wide spectrum of professionals, organisations, and charities working within and alongside mainstream schools and PRUs. Many of these professionals have supported, overseen, and facilitated provision for tens of thousands of students throughout their careers, offering a breadth of insight that spans years of frontline experience.

As our work with educational settings across the UK continues, so too does our commitment to deepening our understanding of young carers' experiences. This publication marks the first in a series of reports, each one building upon the last as we continue to learn, grow, and respond to the insights we gather. While this report represents a significant milestone, it is not the endpoint. We will continue collecting data, exploring new perspectives, and refining our recommendations to ensure our work remains reflective, evidence-informed, and responsive to the evolving educational landscape.

Limitations of this report

This report faces several limitations related to data availability, classification challenges, and the complexity of attributing causation. A key constraint is the lack of comprehensive national data on young carers. Many do not self-identify, and schools may not consistently record their status, creating a significant data gap. As a result, official exclusion statistics typically do not distinguish young carers as a separate group, limiting the ability to assess the true scale and nature of exclusion within this population.

Where data does exist, underreporting and misclassification are common. Behaviour linked to exhaustion, stress, or caregiving-related absence can be mistaken for defiance or disengagement, leading to disciplinary measures that may not reflect the underlying causes. For example, suspensions for persistent absenteeism may result from caring pressures rather than intentional truancy. These nuances are often lost in aggregated figures, obscuring the lived experiences of young carers.

The report primarily relies on data regarding official, statutory exclusions, such as permanent exclusions and fixed-term suspensions, which are recorded in government datasets. However, many young carers experience other, less visible forms of exclusion such as managed moves, coerced part-time timetables, off-rolling, or 'self-exclusion' where families disengage voluntarily. These informal or unrecorded exclusions are difficult to quantify due to inconsistent recording and lack of accountability, meaning the findings here likely underestimate the full extent of exclusion among young carers.

Variation also exists between schools and local authorities in identifying and supporting young carers. Some adopt preventative, pastoral approaches, while others rely more heavily on disciplinary responses, so exclusion figures alone do not fully capture the breadth of young carers' experiences. Moreover, establishing a direct causal link between caring roles and exclusion is complex, as intersecting factors like socioeconomic disadvantage, special educational needs, or mental health challenges also contribute to educational disruption.

The temporal scope of available data is another limitation. Government statistics often provide short-term snapshots, which obscure the long-term effects of exclusion on young carers, such as sustained disengagement or reduced attainment. Ethical and practical challenges, including privacy concerns and stigma, further hinder comprehensive data collection.

When contacted, the Attendance and Exclusions Statistics Team at the Department for Education (DfE) acknowledged this data gap, noting that "the data only covers young carers who have been identified to the school as a young carer. Data should therefore be treated with caution." [2]

In summary, while official datasets offer valuable insights, they provide only a partial view of how exclusions affect young carers. Addressing these gaps will require a more holistic, mixed-methods approach combining quantitative data with qualitative case studies and interviews to better understand the full exclusion landscape for this vulnerable group.

INTRODUCTION

As of April 2025, the most recent comprehensive data from the Department for Education (DfE) on school suspensions and permanent exclusions pertains to the 2022–23 academic year[2].

The analysis presented here is drawn from this national dataset and highlights the disproportionate impact of exclusions and suspensions on young carers across different educational settings:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-exclusion

Report summary

Young carers in secondary school are more than twice as likely to be suspended from school. [2]

Young carers in secondary school are more than twice as likely to be suspended as their non-caring peers. Young carers face disproportionately high disciplinary action, **the suspension rate for non-young carers is 18.8 (rate per 100 pupils) compared to 34.23 (rate per 100 pupils).**

This means that **young carers in secondary school are 65% more likely to receive a suspension at least once compared to their peers without a caring responsibility.** A striking figure given the critical importance of this stage in their academic journey. The frequency of suspensions is especially concerning, as secondary school is a period where exclusions and behavioural referrals typically intensify. These disciplinary measures not only interrupt education but also add further strain to young carers already balancing significant responsibilities, exacerbating inequality and diminishing future opportunities.

Young Carers attending special schools are nearly three times more likely to be suspended at least once. [2]

In 2022 to 2023, **young carers in special schools had a suspension rate of 12.95 (rate per 100 pupils), compared to just 4.75 (rate per 100 pupils) for their non-caring peers.** Young carers in special schools are therefore nearly three times more likely to be suspended at least once.

This stark disparity raises important questions about how well special schools are able to identify and support the underlying causes of behaviour among young carers, particularly those linked to stress, exhaustion or unmet needs at home. Without tailored support and greater awareness, the risk of repeated disciplinary action remains high for this already vulnerable group.

Across all school types nationally, young carers face a significantly higher risk of exclusion and suspension. The disproportionality of this is stark, the exclusion and suspension rate of young carers is more than twice that of their peers without a caring responsibility. [2]

Across all mainstream schools' young carers are more likely to be permanently excluded or experience suspensions. Young carers experience more than double the rate of permanent exclusions to their peers without a caring responsibility. **With 8 in every 100 young carers experiencing at least one suspension, compared to 3.6 in every 100 of their peers without a caring responsibility.**

This data highlights a consistent pattern of increased disciplinary action among young carers, suggesting that their additional responsibilities may not be sufficiently understood or accounted for in school behaviour policies.

Frequent suspensions and exclusions are linked to poorer academic outcomes, reduced future opportunities, and increased risk of mental health difficulties. For young carers managing responsibilities at home alongside school, the risk of disengagement from education is particularly pronounced. These findings underline the importance of early identification, appropriate support, and inclusive strategies to ensure young carers can access and remain engaged in education.

The Department for Education (DfE), said:

> "There are more pupils being suspended, and more frequently and the total number of days pupils are suspended for is increasing "

Report comments

We shared our findings with Deputy CEO and Co-founder of The Difference, Shaun Brown, and he said:

"First up, the disproportionality found in the young carer statistics strongly supports the disproportionality seen in our Lost Learning data for other vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

"MYTIME's focus on young carers is especially powerful in this regard because they are a group that spans multiple demographics, and they are a group that schools are more inclined to engage with. This can encourage approaches that will improve engagement and outcomes for other groups.

"Key to this is a recognition that young carers do not come with 'inherent' or 'innate' deficits, they are defined by their extra responsibilities.

> In that sense, they don't need to be "fixed"; instead, we can focus on their incredible assets.

"This is work that schools are less familiar with. Schools often prefer "fixing the broken," and anything that helps asset-based working become more salient and visible will have much wider benefits. This also encourages schools to take accountability for what they do and do not offer, as well as the barriers they create or remove.

"Finally, young carers are often very hard to spot. In the early stages of becoming a carer, a child may not even recognise that this is what they are, and parents often don't share it.

"It therefore becomes imperative that all staff [Whole School Inclusion] respond to early lost learning with curiosity about the responsibilities children might have in their lives, who they might be supporting, and how that is impacting them."

The IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research) and The Difference: "Who is Losing Learning? Finding solutions to the school engagement crisis" report 2024, said:

> "...There is a stark social injustice in who is affected: the children losing the most learning are those facing the greatest challenges in their lives."

A highly experienced SEN & Inclusion academic, Ella Hanson-Mayne, said:

"Young carers are a group that really are not discussed enough."

Ella, a final-year Education (SEN & Inclusion) student with extensive experience across mainstream, specialist, and alternative provision settings, both in the UK and internationally, shared her reflections on this report. Her work spans early years to secondary education and demonstrates a strong commitment to inclusive, child-centred practice

and the wellbeing of vulnerable learners. Reflecting on the findings of this report, she shared:

> "The key findings from your report really shocked me, if I am honest. It made me think about my own experiences within educational settings and my own higher education surrounding diverse groups of learners and I came to realise that young carers are a group that really are not discussed enough."

She continued by emphasising the need for greater awareness in schools, adding:

"It reinforces the reality that a large number of staff within educational environments I'm sure, are unaware of the number of young carers within their own schools – pupils they may be interacting with daily. I think it's an area that deserves so much attention and focus to better the support, provision and inclusion these learners deserve – I am so glad you are focusing on it."

Her reflections underline a crucial point: even within a field dedicated to inclusion, young carers remain an often-overlooked group, one that demands greater recognition, advocacy, and support within education.

INTRODUCTION

Terminology and scope

Throughout this report, the term Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) will be used to refer to formal, state-maintained Alternative Provision settings that cater to students who are unable to attend mainstream school due to exclusion, behavioural challenges, mental or physical health needs, or other complex circumstances.

While PRUs are a specific type of Alternative Provision (AP), they represent the most common and structured form, subject to local authority oversight and Ofsted inspection. Although the broader category of Alternative Provision includes a wide range of educational settings, such as independent providers and specialist academies, this report focuses primarily on Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). This focus is due to their prevalence, accessibility through local authority referral, and relevance to data and policy relating to suspensions, exclusions, and vulnerable groups such as young carers.

It is also important to note that naming conventions for PRUs vary by region. In some local authorities, such as Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) and Dorset, these settings are more commonly referred to as Learning Centres. Other areas may use terms such as Inclusion Centres or Alternative Learning Provision. While terminology may differ, these settings typically perform the same core function: providing structured, supportive education for students who cannot access mainstream provision.

What is Alternative Provision (AP)?

Alternative Provision refers to education arranged by local authorities or schools for pupils who, for various reasons, cannot attend mainstream school. This includes students who have been excluded, are at risk of exclusion, are unable to attend for medical reasons, or require more specialist support. AP encompasses a range of settings, including independent providers, hospital schools, and local authority-run Pupil Referral Units (PRUs).

What are Pupil Referral Units (PRUs)?

Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) are a formal type of Alternative Provision (AP) designed for students who are unable to attend mainstream schools due to exclusion, illness, behavioural challenges, or other special circumstances. PRUs are state-maintained schools managed by local authorities and are subject to inspection by Ofsted to ensure they meet national educational standards.

These settings provide smaller class sizes, individualised learning plans, and tailored support to help students overcome personal and academic challenges. The curriculum typically includes core subjects such as English, Mathematics, and Science, alongside vocational training, life skills, and social-emotional development. Many PRUs also work in partnership with AP academies and external providers to enhance their educational and pastoral offer.

Some students attend PRUs on a short-term basis, with the aim of reintegrating into mainstream education, while others may remain until the end of their compulsory schooling, gaining recognised qualifications such as GCSEs or vocational certifications. In addition to academic support, PRUs often provide access to mental health and behavioural interventions that build resilience and coping strategies.

According to data from the Department for Education (DfE) and the Scottish Government, there were approximately 348 PRUs across the United Kingdom as of the 2022/23 academic year. Of these, 333 are located in England. Approximately 13,191 pupils were enrolled in PRUs in England during this period.

Background and context

The current picture in England:
Suspensions, Exclusions, and Alternative Provision in England [2]

There are currently 348 Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) across the UK, with approximately 47,600 students enrolled in Alternative Provision (AP) settings. These placements are predominantly for secondary-aged pupils, with Key Stage 4 (ages 14–16) being the most common stage for referral.

In the 2023–2024 academic year, the leading cause of both suspensions and permanent exclusions was persistent disruptive behaviour.

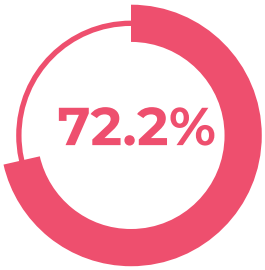
Recent figures highlight significant increases:

Suspensions rose by
40%

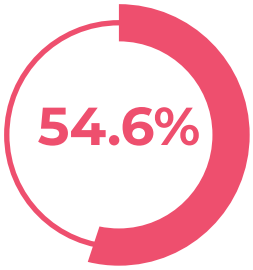
Permanent exclusions increased by
34.3%

(Based on a comparison of autumn term data from 2022–2023 to 2023–2024)

There are stark demographic patterns within PRU populations:



of students in PRUs are boys



are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), compared to 22.5% across the general school population

The most disproportionately affected groups include:

- Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN)
- Those eligible for FSM
- Boys
- Pupils from particular ethnic minority backgrounds
- Students living in high deprivation areas
- Children with complex needs

Young carers and school exclusion

Young carers are at significantly higher risk of being excluded from mainstream education:

- They are, on average, twice as likely to be permanently excluded, suspended once, or suspended multiple times over the course of their school life compared to their non-caring peers.
- In Primary and Special Schools, young carers may be over five times more likely to face permanent exclusion.
- More than one-third of young carers will experience a suspension during their time in Secondary School.

Most young carers are first recognised during Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14), often due to noticeable changes in their school performance or behaviour.[3]

REPORT FINDINGS

Suspensions and exclusion rates of young carers vs non-young carers in England

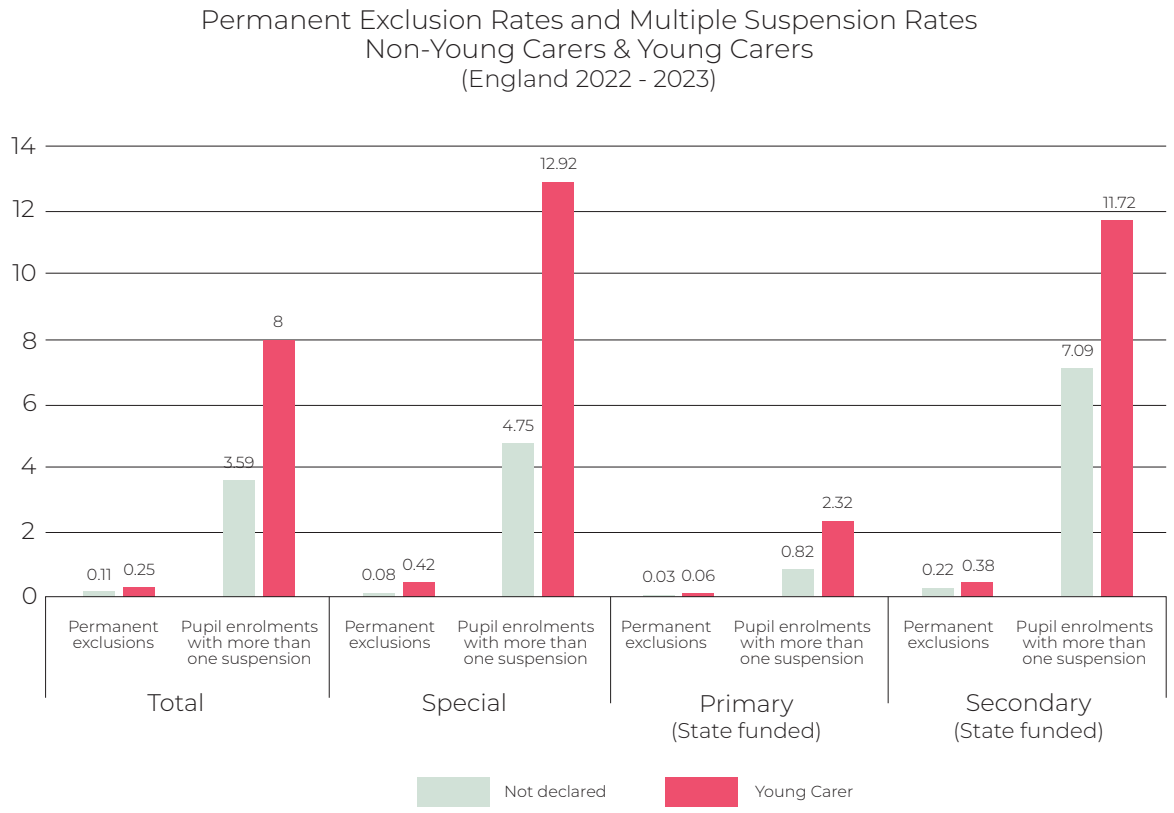


Figure 1: *Permanent Exclusion Rates and Multiple Suspension Rate- Non- Young Carers and Young Carers (England 2022-2023)* [2]

The data paints a stark picture of the challenges faced by young carers in schools across England, revealing that they are significantly more likely to be excluded or suspended on multiple occasions compared to their peers who have not declared any caring responsibilities. This disparity is consistent across all school types, including primary, secondary, and special schools, suggesting systemic issues that go beyond individual cases.

Across all schools, the rate of permanent exclusions for young carers is more than double that of non-declared pupils (0.25 compared to 0.11). This means young carers were more than twice as likely to be permanently excluded. **With 8 in every 100 young carers experiencing at least one suspension compared with 3.6 in every 100 pupils of their peers without a caring responsibility.**

In special schools, the inequality is even more pronounced. The suspension rate for young carers rises to 12.92 (rate per 100 pupils), compared to 4.75 (rate per 100 pupils) of their peers without a caring responsibility. These figures highlight that a particularly vulnerable group of young people who already attend a high-need educational setting being suspended.

In state-funded primary schools, where exclusion and suspension are less common overall, young carers still face higher disciplinary action. **They are twice as likely to be excluded (0.06 vs. 0.03) and nearly three times more likely to be suspended (2.32 vs. 0.82)**, indicating that the challenges of balancing school with caring responsibilities begin early.

The pattern continues in secondary schools, where young carers are significantly more likely to be both suspended and permanently excluded. A rate of 11.72 of young carers faced at least one suspension, compared to 7.09 of non-carers, and the exclusion rate was also higher (0.38 compared to 0.22). It is clear that young carers are disproportionately affected by disciplinary policies.

These statistics provide crucial insight into the reality for young carers: their additional responsibilities at home can impact their behaviour, attendance, and performance in school.

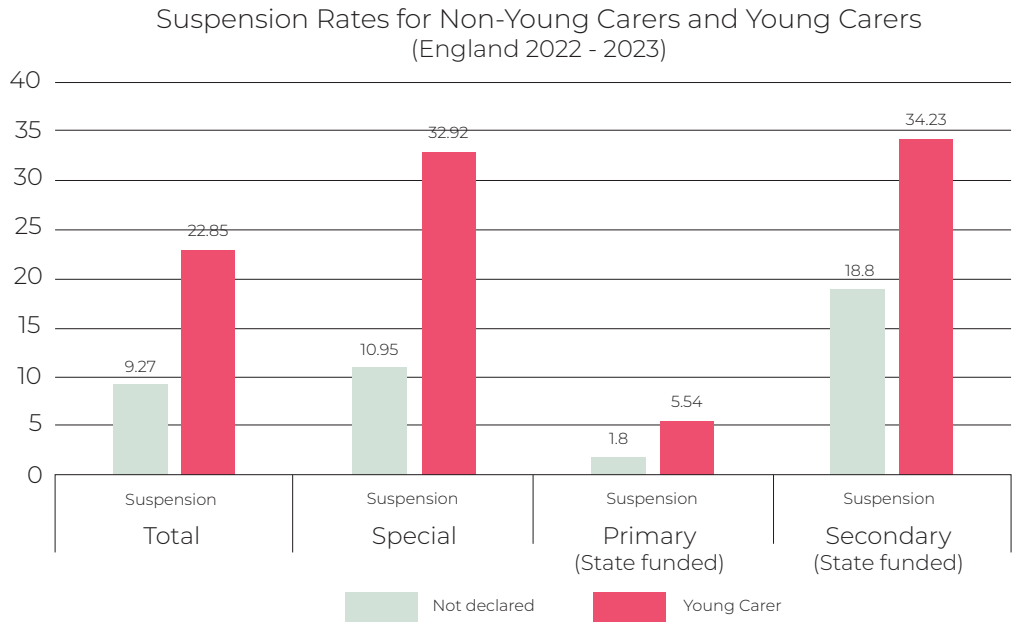


Figure 2: *Suspension Rates for Non-Young Carers and Young Carers (England 2022-2023)* [2]

The data in Figure 2 continues to highlight a deeply concerning reality for young carers in England's schools, focussing solely on suspensions. Across all types of educational settings, including primary, secondary, and special schools, **young carers are significantly more likely to be suspended than pupils who have not declared any caring responsibilities.** These disparities point to an education system that is struggling to adequately support some of its most vulnerable students.

At the national level, the suspension rate for young carers is 22.85%, compared to just 9.27% for pupils who have not been identified as young carers. The implication is clear: the additional challenges and pressures that young carers face are translating into disciplinary consequences, rather than being met with the understanding and support they need.

The gap is even more pronounced in special schools, where the young carer suspension rate is 33 per 100 pupils, compared to a suspension rate of 11 per 100 for their peers without a caring responsibility, which means young carers attending special schools experience an additional 22 suspensions per 100 pupils. Therefore, almost one in three young carers attending special schools which are designed to support children with additional needs experienced a suspension.

In primary schools, suspensions are less frequent overall, but the pattern remains the same. **Young carers attending primary school are over three times more likely to be suspended than their peers without a caring responsibility.** That means even the youngest young carers, many of whom are still in early stages of development, are more than three times as likely to face exclusion from their classrooms.

In secondary schools, where disciplinary incidents are more common, the disparities remain stark, **34.23 per 100 young carers received a suspension, compared to 18.8 per 100 of their peers without a caring responsibility.** This highlights that a substantial proportion of young carers are being removed from the learning environment at a critical stage of their education.

These figures offer a powerful insight into the reality young carers face in school and it makes a compelling case for urgent reform in how schools identify and respond to their needs. There must be a shift from punishment to proactive, compassionate support that keeps them engaged in education and better prepared for their future.

CASE STUDY

"No One Asked Me"

A Young Boy's Journey Through Exclusion, Chaos, and Survival

"Everyone just told me what they believed I was. No one ever really asked who I was, or why I behaved the way I did"

I was always called hyperactive. That's what people used to say about me in primary school. But looking back now, I think I was just a kid trying to survive a home that felt like a war zone.

There was always chaos. Always violence. My dad would abuse substances and lose it, smashing up the house, throwing beer cans, chucking chairs. I remember one evening, we were all just eating dinner. Out of nowhere, Mum was bleeding, and me, my brother and Mum had to leave the house, the whole place was wrecked. After things like that, you don't sleep. You don't feel safe. You can't relax. You're constantly on edge, terrified. I often used to sleep on the floor or stairs so I could hear if anyone got hurt. And at that age, I didn't even know it was called domestic violence.

Eventually, Dad left. Not long after, my older brother went too. That's when Mum's drinking really spiralled. I didn't want to be at home, so I avoided it.

What should've been a simple 20-minute walk home after school, often took hours. Sometimes I'd stay out until 9 p.m., or not go home at all. And when I did go back, it was worse. Mum would be passed out on the floor, sick on herself, naked. One vivid memory is the time I found her soaked in her own urine.

People thought she was the "cool" mum: fun, carefree, always up for a party. But they didn't see what I saw.

Violence at home, violence in me. I became aggressive. A bully. Always ready to fight. If someone came near us, we'd fight them off. I was constantly in defence mode. It was survival.

School wasn't any better. Teachers were cold, dismissive.
I felt like I had to battle them just to exist in a classroom. Some days I'd walk in and get told to "Get out!" before I'd even sat down.

And I was angry. Angry about what was happening at home. Angry at being judged the moment I entered a room. Angry that no one seemed to want to understand.

In primary school, I once kicked a boy so hard he hit the stairs and needed surgery. That got me suspended. Then excluded. We were advised, off the record, not to return.

No one ever asked how I was. No one ever said, "How are you" or "are you OK?"

Everyone just labelled me. Everyone just told me what they believed I was. No one ever asked who I was, or why I behaved the way I did. No one dug deeper.

When I got excluded, I actually felt relieved. To me, it meant time off. A break.

But secondary school wasn't a fresh start. I was still judged. Still compared to my brother. They didn't place me in classes based on ability, only on behaviour.

I ended up in top-set French and German when I could barely speak either. I felt stupid. Humiliated. I was hopeless with basic maths, yet they threw me into advanced algebra. I never learned the foundations, and to this day, I still struggle with simple maths, but weirdly, I can handle some complex equations. It's a strange trauma to carry, always feeling like I have to be clever just to be accepted.

There were times I felt pure shame. Sitting in isolation rooms with so-called "bad kids" thinking "how did I end up here?" My behaviour didn't match theirs. But I was being punished the same way.

By Year 9, I was in isolation more than I was in lessons. And weirdly, I found comfort there. The staff actually listened. They asked what had happened. They cared. That room became my safe space.

But when my exclusion hearing happened, those teachers weren't even allowed to speak on my behalf. The people who knew me weren't given a voice.

That's how it always felt, like no one was ever really on my side.

Mum blamed me. School tried to get rid of me. Dad and brother weren't around. There was no support, no call home, no intervention. When I got suspended for supposedly trying to hit a teacher (something that didn't happen, I'd punched a door in frustration) it still ended in exclusion.

I felt completely failed. Failed by school. Failed by home. I wasn't just

angry, I was scared, overwhelmed, and lost. And the message I got from all of it was clear: You're not going to be anything.

I genuinely believed I wouldn't amount to anything. That's what exclusion teaches you, that you're worthless. That there's no hope.

Then came the referral. Not to a behaviour unit, but to a specialist school for others that struggled in mainstream. A member of staff who knew the settings saw something in me. They saw potential.

And for the first time, I felt human.

This place was the opposite of everything I'd known. They didn't care about uniform or whether you fancied a cup of tea.
They treated us like people. Like equals. We laughed together. Learned together and played together. No one got shouted at. No one got sent out. And because of that, the behaviour was flawless. There was compassion everywhere.

Every student had time. Attention. Support. I had to stay after school to redo coursework that my old school had "lost." A teacher would sit beside me and help me, even though they didn't have to. But they did.

That school didn't save me. It showed me I was worth saving.

I completed my Key Skills and decided to apply to college. I didn't even know university was an option for someone like me. But one teacher sat down with me after school, gave up their own time, and walked me through the application. Just like that, someone believed in me.

Yes, and arguably inevitably, I did get involved in the criminal justice system. But strangely, that became a lifeline too. It gave me a flat. A place of my own. Somewhere I could finally breathe. It wasn't ideal. It was a halfway house for adults, filthy and run-down, but it was mine.
And living alone at 16 gave me space to think. To just exist without being in survival mode.

Even now, I still carry the trauma. I still feel like I have to be the smartest in the room to earn a place. But I also know that I was never the problem. I was just a child.

And in all that noise, no adult ever helped make sense of what was happening.

I didn't realise it at the time that Mum was an alcoholic. Obviously, that's what it was. And if just one

adult had spoken to me properly, they could've figured it out because I was always very honest and very open. They could've helped. Maybe not just me, but all of us. Maybe they could have saved our family.

Now, I don't speak to my dad. I don't have a relationship with my brother. My relationship with my mum is still fragile. She still drinks. She still struggles.

Could early intervention have made a difference? Could a referral have prevented this?

When there's chaos in your life as a child, having just one adult who can help you make sense of it all can change everything. They can help keep you on a path, a positive one. But no one did that for me. No one explained what I was feeling. I was just left to figure it out alone.

In the end, it wasn't a system that helped me, it was people. The teacher who stayed behind. The school that treated me with dignity. The room where I felt seen.

We expect alternative provision to fix what mainstream schools often struggle with. But if schools truly worked, if they genuinely understood children, fewer of us would fall through the cracks.

Because when kids act out, they're usually just reflecting what is around them. Kids are just innocent sponges. I never trusted the system. I still don't. But I do believe in people.

And if there's one thing I've learned, it's this: every child deserves someone in their corner.

Because in the middle of all that chaos?
There was a child.
And no one was there for him.
Until someone was.

And to anyone going through something similar, here's what I want you to know:

Voice your opinion, always.
Speak your truth.

Just because someone's an adult, doesn't mean they're right.

**"The saddest part about being a young carer, is that you don't realise you are a young carer; it is just your day-to-day reality.
And we're not broken; we're overwhelmed."**

Stand up for what you believe in. Even when it's hard.

Success doesn't look the same for everyone. Achievement is different for every single person.

You are already valuable. You are already a miracle, just by existing.

And to the adults reading this, especially teachers, please hear me:

You matter more than you'll ever know.

It should be common knowledge in society just how powerful and valuable you are.

And when teachers are brilliant, when they care, when they listen, they give us the best possible chance to be great.

"Being a teacher is not just a job. It's a responsibility. A privilege.

You are shaping the next generation. You're often the difference between a child sinking or swimming."

REPORT FINDINGS

Who is most likely to be referred to a PRU
and How This Links to Young Carers

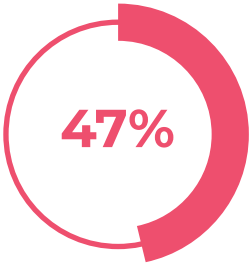
Young people with behavioural issues
Persistent disruptive behaviour is a primary reason for exclusion from mainstream schools. In 2023/24, it accounted for 50% of all suspensions and 36% of permanent exclusions [2]. Behaviour cited includes not focusing, fidgeting, or not completing work, which is often seen as deliberate disruption.

Link to young carers:
Young carers frequently experience emotional strain, fatigue, and stress due to their responsibilities at home. These pressures can present in school as restlessness, difficulty concentrating, or withdrawal, behaviours easily misunderstood as defiance. Without recognition of the underlying cause, young carers are at increased risk of suspension or exclusion, often leading to a referral to a PRU.

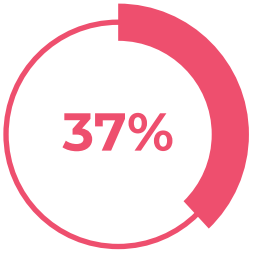
Young people with mental health or SEMH difficulties
Students with anxiety, depression, trauma, or stress-related conditions are often referred to PRUs when mainstream environments become overwhelming.

Link to young carers:
Mental health challenges are significantly more common among young carers. They are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and chronic stress due to their caring roles. These conditions can impact attendance, engagement, and behaviour, all of which can trigger exclusion and PRU referral.

of young carers experience anxiety/depression (vs 8% of non-carers)[4]



of female young adult carers feel 'always' or 'usually' stressed [4]



of male young adult carers feel 'always' or 'usually' stressed [4]

Young people with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities)
Students with ADHD, autism, or learning difficulties are frequently referred to PRUs when their needs are not identified or supported in mainstream schools.

Link to young carers:
Many young carers are on the SEND register or have unidentified learning needs that go unrecognised due to their caregiving role masking symptoms. Fatigue, lateness, or disorganisation may be seen as behavioural rather than support needs. As a result, young carers may face exclusion before receiving proper assessment or support.

32% of young carers in KS2 are on the SEND register (vs 13% of other pupils) [5]

Students with an EHCP are over 3.5x more likely to be excluded than peers without SEND. [6]

The link between SEND and young carers is explored in a recent report released by MYTIME young carers called **'Balancing Act: The reality for young carers with SEND'.**

Young people who are disengaged from education
Students who are chronically disengaged, due to personal struggles, academic challenges, or demotivation, are often referred to PRUs to help them re-engage.

Link to young carers:
Many young carers balance up to 49 hours of care per week[7] with school, leaving little time or energy for learning. This can lead to reduced attendance, falling grades, and disconnection from peers or teachers. Without appropriate support, this disengagement can escalate to exclusion and referral.

Suspension rates for young carers rise from 5.35 in Year 7 to 11.18 in Year 10 [8]

Only 55% of young carers achieve grade 4+ in English and Maths (vs 68% of peers) [7]

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds
Pupils from low-income households, care backgrounds, or families in crisis are more likely to be referred to PRUs due to compounded social, emotional, or financial pressures.

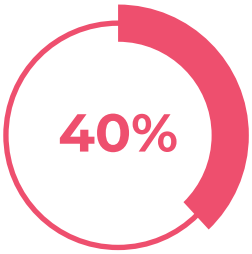
Link to young carers:
A significant proportion of young carers live in poverty or face instability at home. These factors increase the risk of emotional distress, poor attendance, and school conflict, circumstances that often lead to PRU referral.

44% of young carers receive Free School Meals (vs 17% of non-carers) [9]

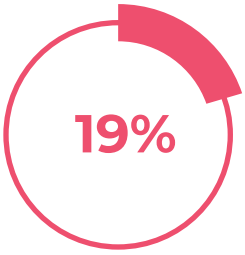
53% are eligible for Pupil Premium (vs 20% of non-carers) [8]

Young people involved in risky or criminal behaviour
Students involved in anti-social behaviour, gang affiliation, or who are vulnerable to exploitation may be referred to PRUs for safeguarding and intervention.

Link to young carers:
Without support, young carers experiencing stress, social isolation, and low supervision are at increased risk of engaging in risky peer relationships. Their circumstances, often marked by poverty or a lack of protective factors, can contribute to behaviours that result in exclusion.



of young carers have little or no time to spend with friends [10]



of young adult carers report low social contact and high isolation [9]

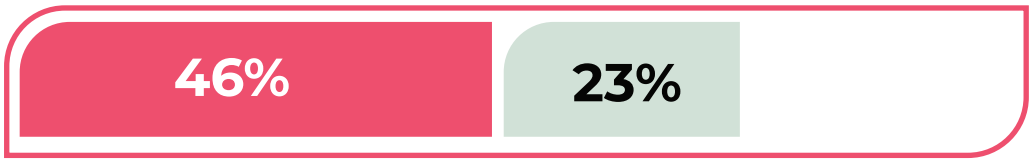
Young people who are persistently absent or avoiding school (EBSA/Truancy)

Regular absences caused by emotional distress, social difficulties, or lack of home support often lead to PRU referral.

Link to young carers:

Many young carers miss school due to caregiving demands, resulting in academic gaps, reduced attainment, and school disengagement. Over time, this absence can escalate to formal intervention, including PRU referral.

- They miss an average of 23 days of school per year [10]
- EBSA increases from 33% in Year 7 to 53% in Year 11 among young carers [10]



46% of young carers are persistently absent from secondary school (vs 23% of peers) [11]

Young Carer Non Young Carers

Young people from minority or marginalised communities

Pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds, refugee families, or those experiencing discrimination are overrepresented in exclusion and PRU referral statistics.

Link to young carers:

Young carers from minority groups may face dual disadvantage: discrimination in school and hidden caregiving responsibilities at home. This combination can exacerbate stress, impact behaviour, and limit

access to support, leading to higher rates of exclusion and referral.

- Gypsy/Roma, Irish Traveller, and White & Black Caribbean students have the highest exclusion rates nationally [12]
- Language, cultural barriers, and lack of support compound these risks for minoritised young carers [11]

Young people with a history of exclusion
Students with repeated suspensions or permanent exclusions are often referred to PRUs due to persistent conflict with mainstream settings.

Link to young carers:
Young carers are more than twice as likely to be suspended and face repeated school exclusions. These patterns often stem from unrecognised needs and responsibilities, making them more susceptible to being permanently moved out of mainstream provision.

- They are over twice as likely to receive external suspensions of 1–5 days [12]

Young carers are more than twice as likely to be suspended and face repeated school exclusions. [13]

Young Carer Non Young Carers

Young people with complex needs
Students with overlapping challenges, such as trauma, neurodiversity, mental health issues, and family instability, often require holistic, multi-agency support that mainstream schools may not provide, leading to PRU referral.

Link to young carers:
Young carers frequently present with multiple, compounding difficulties. They may care for a parent with mental illness, experience trauma or attachment issues, or have undiagnosed SEND. These layered needs often manifest as behaviour issues or disengagement, increasing the likelihood of exclusion.

- Young carers are significantly more likely to experience emotional dysregulation, isolation, and trauma

1 in 3 children in the UK live with a parent experiencing poor mental health [14]

REPORT FINDINGS

The role of PRUs in supporting young carers
opportunities and challenges

The positives of young carers attending PRUs:

Supportive and individualised learning environment

PRUs are specifically designed to deliver a personalised approach to learning, which is crucial for young carers who often experience emotional and academic disruption due to their responsibilities. These settings foster a nurturing environment that prioritises students' personal development and well-being.

One parent reflected on the benefits of a local alternative provision: “He felt much more supported... they focused on individual personal development needs... it improved his sense of worth as it was something he was good at.” She urged others facing similar challenges: “My honest opinion would be to move to a more supportive school.”

Smaller class sizes

PRUs typically maintain very small class sizes, allowing for targeted teaching and consistent staff support. This structure is highly beneficial for young carers who may struggle with attention, fatigue, or anxiety due to their caregiving roles.

A parent compared the PRU experience to independent schooling: “It felt like private education, because there’s around five pupils in a class.” This allowed for “a more bespoke learning experience” and stronger engagement.

Personalised attention

One-to-one support in PRUs helps young carers manage their emotional needs while staying connected to education.

A trainee educational professional observed: "It's an opportunity for them to hopefully receive more individualised provision and care, to be reminded that they are cared for, and that there are practitioners within educational environments who genuinely want to support them."

Emphasis on pastoral care

PRUs adopt a trauma-informed approach that recognises behaviour as a reflection of underlying needs. For young carers, this emotional support is often vital.

One parent highlighted the contrast with mainstream settings: "The difference with this school and these teachers is that they acknowledge that his reactions are allowed because he has been bullied."

Greater flexibility

Flexible timetables and curriculum adjustments allow young carers to balance education with their responsibilities at home, reducing stress and disengagement.

One parent criticised inflexible mainstream requirements stating that "children who academically struggle should not have to participate in lessons that are unhelpful to them or their confidence." She found the pressure of additional language classes "degrading" for her son, believing time would be better spent catching up on a core subject such as English.

A final-year SEND and Inclusion specialist emphasised the role of creativity that is often more widely explored in PRUs: "Creative subjects have such a big impact on psychological well-being... something young carers may never get the time to do at home."

Pacing and reduced pressure

PRUs often allow students to progress at a gentler pace, which benefits young carers who face interrupted learning and emotional fatigue. A mother observed the relief her child felt upon leaving the fast-paced environment of mainstream education: "My child felt relieved."

Another former young carer described himself as "feeling happy" when his struggles finally resulted in him being removed from mainstream.

Tailored support for overcoming challenges

Young carers benefit from support plans that address both academic and emotional barriers, helping them re-engage with learning and build resilience, often in ways that mainstream settings struggle to provide. As one experienced educator explained: "Young carers may display certain behaviour... fuelled by their personal experiences at home. If schools are unaware, they won't understand the reasons behind it."

Reduced stigma and a safe environment

In PRUs, students are often surrounded by peers with similar life experiences, which can ease feelings of isolation and reduce stigma. As a former young carer shared, "Being with other people who are in the same boat" can help create a sense of safety and understanding.

An SEND and Inclusion specialist emphasised the importance of replicating this kind of emotional support in mainstream settings, suggesting that "Regular check-ins for every child... even just 15 minutes a week... would reinforce to learners that they are cared for as a whole person."

Collaboration with other agencies

PRUs often work in partnership with youth services, mental health professionals, social workers, and other agencies, ensuring that young carers receive the comprehensive support they need. This multidisciplinary approach addresses a range of needs, from mental health care to family support, making it easier for young carers to get the help they need both in and outside of school.

Pathway to future success

PRUs aim to equip students with the skills and support they need to succeed beyond school. For young carers, this includes gaining qualifications such as GCSEs, as well as developing practical life skills that support their transition into further education, training, or employment. The personalised and nurturing environment of PRUs can help young carers overcome barriers and realise their potential.

One former young carer reflected on how targeted workshops at their PRU, often based on the hobbies and interests of the young people, were "incredible" and were a "complete inverse to mainstream." These sessions not only engaged them meaningfully but also served as a steppingstone toward future careers and aspirations.

Challenges faced by young carers in PRUs

Social stigma

The label of being placed in a PRU can intensify feelings of exclusion and reinforce damaging stereotypes. For young carers, this stigma can extend beyond the school gates and into the home.

One former young carer reflected, "You're already coming from a disadvantaged background... we need additional help," but explained that her family avoided seeking support due to "pride" and fear of judgment. This illustrates how stigma can not only isolate students but also discourage families from accessing vital support.

Peer relationships

While PRUs can offer a more nurturing and individualised learning environment, the transition away from mainstream education can come at a social cost. For many young carers, referral to a PRU means separation from their established peer groups, often their primary source of emotional support and belonging. This disruption can intensify feelings of isolation and reinforce a sense of being 'different'.

One former young carer reflected on this shift, describing their experience as "more isolating than inclusive," and adding, "your experience is already different from everyone else's." The move to alternative provision, though sometimes necessary, marked them as 'other' and removed the peer connections that had previously helped them manage both school and caring responsibilities.

Another former young carer, who had struggled in mainstream but avoided exclusion, echoed this sentiment: "My support network was also my friends, so you would have completely removed any support network I had... It would have isolated me."

Peer influence

The peer environment in PRUs often includes students with complex behavioural and emotional needs. For young carers, this can present additional challenges, exposing them to negative influences such as

anti-social behaviour, emotional dysregulation, or unsafe peer dynamics, all of which may hinder personal development.

A former PRU staff member explained: “They're surrounded by other vulnerable students… they're trying to act up to impress them or because they don't want to be bullied.” One parent also noticed a shift in their child’s behaviour: “He's mimicking what these kids are doing… it's gone from ADHD symptoms to anger and aggression.”

As one SEMH provision leader put it, “Grouping these children together… reinforces learned behaviour,” underscoring the potential for unintended harm when peer dynamics go unaddressed.

Disruption and adjustment

Transitions into PRUs often follow a period of crisis, meaning students arrive already emotionally vulnerable. The shift can be abrupt, with new staff, unfamiliar routines, and different behaviour systems, all of which may heighten anxiety and distress.

An AP practitioner described the experience: “There’s different teaching staff, a different behaviour system… they don’t know the place. It provides further issues for students with mental health difficulties.”

For young carers, this disruption can be even more pronounced. Being placed in unfamiliar settings, sometimes outside their local area (which can be common with PRU referrals) can remove what little consistency or support they had, compounding the emotional impact of the transition.

Academic limitations

PRUs often offer a reduced curriculum and may have limited access to subject specialists or formal assessments. This can significantly hinder academic progress—particularly for young carers, who are already managing additional responsibilities outside school.

As one AP teacher observed: “They’re working, but not necessarily on the same things” and went on to explain that it is likely that they are covering topics that “they know nothing about”. These inconsistencies in curriculum and qualifications can restrict future opportunities.

According to DfE (2024), fewer than 5% of AP students achieve a standard pass in English and maths, underscoring the long-term educational disadvantage many face.

Misalignment with long-term outcomes

In some PRUs, the heavy focus on behaviour management can overshadow academic and personal development, which can leave students, particularly young carers, underprepared for life beyond school.

Without access to structured careers guidance, qualifications, or real-world preparation, many leave feeling directionless. One parent reflected, "He left with no guidance on next steps and is now a little lost." A professional summed up the long-term consequences starkly: "He was taxied for his whole school career… and at the end, he was unemployable and out on the streets."

These stories reveal how a lack of future-focused planning can deepen vulnerability and limit young carers' life chances.

Funding and resource limitations

PRUs often operate under significant financial constraints, limiting access to qualified teachers, therapeutic support, and enrichment opportunities. This can directly affect the quality of education and wellbeing support available to young carers.

Recent research by The Difference and IPPR (2024) highlights that nearly one-third of pupils in privately run alternative provision attend settings rated inadequate or ungraded by Ofsted , which raises serious concerns about consistency and quality.

Lack of regulation and oversight

The increase in unregistered PRUs presents a major safeguarding concern. Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, there was a 49% rise in the number of children placed in such settings .

Young carers in unregistered environments face heightened risks, as these settings often lack oversight, quality assurance, and clear

accountability mechanisms, which can leave already vulnerable pupils exposed to further harm.

Transition to adulthood and long-term impact

Poorly managed transitions out of PRUs can profoundly affect young carers' futures. Without adequate guidance or structured support, many leave education feeling lost and unprepared for adult life.

One former student reflected: "Only now, in reflection, I realise how quickly they changed the trajectory of my life... I didn't know what to do." Another parent shared: "He left a PRU with no guidance and is now a little lost." These testimonies highlight how the absence of long-term planning compounds the existing barriers young carers face, risking deeper disadvantage.

Conclusion

PRUs provide vital support for young carers facing exclusion, mental health challenges, and disrupted education. Their strengths lie in personalised attention, flexible structures, and holistic care. However, significant challenges persist, including stigma, limited academic opportunities, negative peer influences, and insufficient regulation. While PRUs can be a lifeline, they are not a cure-all.

To truly support young carers, greater investment, stronger oversight, and a commitment to inclusion across all educational settings are essential. As one parent reflected: "I think ultimately the school could have put things in place to help manage his additional needs, which would have prevented suspension and exclusion." Despite her son's diagnoses (PTSD, ADHD, and epilepsy), she felt "they were not necessarily heard."

The emotional toll is clear in the testimonies shared. A young person recalled, "I lost hope in systems because of the way they handled me so carelessly, making me feel like I didn't matter." Another parent echoed, "The exclusion had a huge impact on his mental health and self-worth, which minimised his future opportunities."

A practitioner with frontline experience of working in a PRU concluded, "There remains a significant lack of understanding around trauma-informed behaviour... specifically in relation to young carers." Addressing these gaps is crucial if we are to create education systems where young carers feel seen, supported, and empowered to thrive.

CASE STUDY - Educational Setting

Case Study 1: Navigating SEMH challenges for young carers in Alternative education

Introduction

This case study explores the experiences of young carers within a specialist education provision that supports students with SEMH including Autism. The data highlights the proportion of young carers within the school, their risk of exclusion, and the role of education professionals in identifying and supporting them.

Young Carers in the school community

Out of 48 students enrolled at the school, 16 (33.3%) have been identified as young carers. This significant proportion demonstrates the prevalence of caring responsibilities among students with additional educational needs and underscores the importance of tailored support within specialist settings.

Exclusions and behavioural challenges

The data reveals that 31.25% of young carers in this school have experienced either a suspension or permanent exclusion. The primary reasons cited were damage to property and aggressive behaviour towards both peers and staff, including verbal and physical incidents.

Young carers often face increased emotional and psychological stress due to their responsibilities at home, which may contribute to difficulties in regulating emotions and behaviour in school. This highlights the need for preventative approaches and individualised support to reduce exclusions and ensure these students remain engaged in their education.

Identification of young carers

Of the 16 young carers, only four self-identified, while twelve (75%) were identified by school staff. This finding emphasises the critical role of education professionals in recognising young carers, as many may not self-identify due to a lack of awareness, fear of stigma, or concerns about being treated differently.

This reinforces the need for ongoing staff training and awareness programmes to

ensure young carers are identified early and provided with the necessary support before their responsibilities negatively impact their education and well-being.

Reintegration and support strategies

For young carers who have experienced a suspension or permanent exclusion, the school has a reintegration plan in place. This includes a meeting between the Principal, parent(s), and the pupil to discuss the behaviour displayed, assess additional support needs, and outline the next steps should similar incidents occur.

While this approach provides a foundation for re-engagement, there is an opportunity to strengthen reintegration strategies by incorporating:

- Trauma-informed approaches to help young carers manage stress and regulate emotions.
- Flexible learning options that accommodate their caring responsibilities.
- Dedicated young carer support groups to provide peer support and reduce feelings of isolation.

Key findings & implications

Young carers represent a significant proportion (33.3%) of students in this specialist provision.

Young carers are at a higher risk of exclusion, with 31.25% experiencing either a suspension or permanent exclusion due to behavioural challenges.

The majority of young carers were identified by school staff (75%), demonstrating the essential role professionals play in recognising and supporting them.

CASE STUDY - Educational Setting

Case Study 2: Supporting young carers in Pupil referral units

Introduction

This PRU provides educational provision for students in Year 7 to Year 11 who are at risk of permanent exclusion, have been permanently excluded, or have SEND that the setting is equipped to support. The provision includes a turnaround programme for dual-registered students in Key Stage 3 and 4, designed for children at risk of exclusion, as well as offering permanent education for students who are unable to access mainstream schools. The curriculum consists of both core and vocational subjects, aiming to provide a holistic and tailored educational experience. Furthermore, the unit operates as a Trauma-Informed and Therapeutic Thinking School, recognising the significance of addressing both emotional and psychological needs alongside academic development.

This case study explores the experiences of young carers within this alternative education setting, highlighting their challenges, the risk of exclusion, and the specific strategies in place to support their reintegration and ongoing education.

Young Carers in the school community

Out of 57 students currently enrolled in the setting (with a capacity for around 60, excluding 10 students offsite), three students have been identified as young carers. This number has increased since first corresponding with the PRU, as they initially advised they had zero, and within a month, had identified three. While these young carers have not been officially acknowledged through discussions with parents or the young carers themselves, they are considered to have caring responsibilities based on their roles at home. These young carers support parents or siblings with additional needs, such as autism or other disabilities.

Exclusions and behavioural challenges

Among the three young carers, two (66.67%) have experienced permanent exclusion. Of these, one (33.33%) was excluded due to persistent disruptive behaviour, another (33.33%) faced permanent exclusion for both persistent

disruptive behaviour and assault on a peer. The remaining young carer was involved in medical dual-registration.

Young carers often face significant emotional and psychological stress due to their caregiving roles at home, which can impact their behaviour and emotional regulation in school. This may lead to difficulties in maintaining attendance or engaging fully in classroom activities. For example, one young carer has been identified as an EBSA, with an attendance rate of just 10%. However, since joining this provision, their attendance has improved to 60%, indicating the potential for positive change when appropriate support and understanding are provided.

Identification of young carers

All three young carers in this setting were identified by staff rather than self-identified. This further underscores the essential role of education professionals in recognising the signs of young carers, as many students or their families may be reluctant to disclose their caring roles due to fear of stigma or lack of awareness of the support available.

Reintegration and support strategies

For all the young people who have been referred to this provision, the setting has tailored reintegration strategies in place. But specifically looking at the young carers in this provision, one trialled a return to mainstream education but was unsuccessful after just one day and will remain in this provision to receive more focused, individualised support. Another young carer, in Year 11, is in the process of receiving an EHCP and has Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), with plans for transition to college and post-16 education. The third young carer, in Year 10, is appealing the decision regarding their EHCP and may be placed in a different part of the country for Year 11, depending on the outcome of court proceedings.

In cases where students return to mainstream education, this setting has developed a reintegration plan that includes the sharing of detailed information with mainstream schools. Any young carers identified will be provided with a pack of information outlining the support they have received during their time

at the PRU. This will include work done with external support agencies, such as MYTIME, as well as a summary of why they were identified as young carers and what support is currently in place. This ensures that mainstream schools can implement the strategies and support required to continue meeting the needs of these students when they return.

As many students in this cohort meet the criteria for young carers, the setting is continuing to actively work to identify those who may require additional support beyond what is already provided. Since many of the strategies that mainstream schools would typically implement are already in place at the unit, students, whether formally identified as young carers or not, will return to mainstream schools with the strategies and support that have been effective for them. This approach aims to support young carers who may not have been formally identified, ensuring they still receive the necessary assistance when they transition back to mainstream education.

Key findings & implications

Young carers currently represent a small but significant group (5.3%) of the student population within this alternative provision. However, this number is likely to rise with the continued work with staff in this setting.

Two of the three young carers have experienced permanent exclusion or suspension, highlighting the challenges they face in managing both their caring responsibilities and their behaviour in school.

All young carers were identified by staff, rather than self-identifying, which highlights the importance of staff awareness and proactive identification to provide timely support.

The setting offers clear reintegration and support plans for young carers, but challenges such as attendance and emotional regulation continue to require targeted strategies and ongoing support.

Support for young carers

To support the young carers in this setting, the following strategies have been implemented:

- Time-Out Passes: These have proven helpful for managing moments of stress, allowing students to take a break and return to learning when ready.

- Individualised Support: A focus on personalised support helps to address barriers to attendance and engagement, particularly for students facing significant emotional challenges. We also work closely with families when possible, to ensure the best outcomes for each young carer.

The case of the young carer with EBSA, whose attendance improved from 10% to 60%, highlights the importance of a consistent, personalised approach to supporting young carers. These strategies may include mental health support, addressing attendance barriers, and offering flexible learning options.

Conclusion

This case study highlights the importance of recognising and supporting young carers within alternative education settings. While these students face significant challenges due to their caregiving roles, tailored support and a Trauma-Informed approach can have a positive impact. The proactive identification of young carers by education professionals, alongside the implementation of individualised reintegration and support plans, is crucial in helping these students succeed both academically and emotionally.

Case studies conclusion

Supporting young carers in Alternative education settings

The case studies presented in this report highlight the critical importance of recognising and responding to the needs of young carers within specialist and alternative education settings. These students often face a unique blend of challenges, including emotional distress, behavioural difficulties, and disrupted learning, frequently as a result of their hidden caring responsibilities.

A consistent theme across both settings was that the majority of young carers were identified by staff rather than through self-disclosure. This pattern reflects the stigma, silence, or lack of awareness that still surrounds young carers and reinforces the vital role that skilled, observant professionals play in early identification. Staff awareness, combined with targeted support, proved instrumental in ensuring these young people were not left to struggle in silence.

Rates of suspension, exclusion, and emotional dysregulation were notably high among this group, underscoring the strain of balancing home responsibilities with the demands of school. Many young carers demonstrated difficulties with emotional regulation, especially in unfamiliar, rigid, or unsupportive environments. However, the case studies also demonstrate that with a trauma-informed, relational, and flexible approach, young carers can begin to re-engage in education and improve both academically and emotionally.

Positive outcomes were most evident where tailored strategies were consistently in place. Examples include time-out passes, regular check-ins, trusted adult mentors, and structured reintegration plans. These interventions helped young carers feel safe, valued, and supported. Notable improvements in attendance, wellbeing, and relationships occurred when schools created space for understanding and relational connection.

Importantly, these examples show that relational and proactive approaches have far greater impact than reactive or punitive ones. A whole-setting model that includes early identification, personalised pastoral care, and staff development can reshape how young carers experience education. This type of environment reduces the risk of exclusion and helps ensure no young carer is left behind.

While the barriers faced by young carers are complex and often deeply embedded in wider social inequalities, these case studies provide a clear and hopeful message. Meaningful change is not only possible, it is already happening in settings where the right systems, relationships, and values are in place. When educational provision is responsive, compassionate, and consistent, it can become a place where young carers do more than survive. It can become a place where they begin to thrive.

An Assistant Headteacher from a Dorset-based PRU we are currently working with reflected on the significant, and often hidden, presence of young carers within their setting. While officially there are only two students identified as young carers by the local authority, he estimated that, using MYTIME's broader definition, "the numbers would swell to around 80% of our students in KS4."

He expressed concern about the disproportionate rates of suspension and exclusion among young carers in mainstream schools, observing that this often stems from their caring responsibilities: "They are not focused on their education at that moment in time due to having had to care for others before or after school."

He also emphasised the emotional impact of caring roles, stating that young carers "need additional support to regulate their emotions to be in a position to be able to learn."

To improve educational outcomes, he suggested the importance of dedicated intervention: "Assign workers to specifically target these vulnerable young people."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Report summary

This report highlights the unique and complex challenges faced by young carers within the education system, alternative education settings, and their heightened risk of suspension, exclusion, and referral to PRUs.

Despite representing a small but significant proportion of students, young carers often remain unseen due to limited self-identification, making staff awareness and proactive identification essential.

Through case studies and practitioner insights, the report highlights the strong connections between caring responsibilities, behavioural challenges, and educational disruption. Tailored and trauma-informed support, such as individualised reintegration plans, flexible learning approaches, and the presence of a designated trusted adult, can lead to significant improvements in attendance, engagement, and emotional wellbeing for young carers.

The report concludes with clear recommendations for specialist settings to enhance training, reduce stigma, implement early intervention, and ensure continuity of care across transitions. MYTIME's ongoing research and pilot programmes aim to build evidence-based resources and practices to better support this vulnerable group.

Final note

Young carers are a vital yet frequently overlooked group within our education system. Addressing their needs requires a coordinated and compassionate approach that values their lived experiences and recognises their challenges. With increased awareness, targeted support, and meaningful systemic change, we can ensure that young carers not only remain in education but also thrive, achieving their full potential both academically and personally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Creating a Whole-System Approach to preventing exclusion and supporting young carers in education

Across both mainstream and Alternative Provision settings, young carers face unique pressures that can lead to emotional dysregulation, attendance challenges, and behavioural incidents. These factors significantly increase the likelihood of suspension, exclusion, or referral to Alternative Provision. However, the case studies and wider findings in this report show that with the right support systems in place, young carers can thrive, both academically and emotionally.

To better support young carers across all educational settings, we recommend the following actions. These are informed by insights from practice, research, and MYTIME's embedded work within schools and Alternative Provision through the Level Up Programme and our bespoke Alternative Provision model.

01 Recognise young carers as a Vulnerable Group in policy and practice

Formally include young carers within school safeguarding, inclusion, behaviour, and attendance frameworks.

Ensure they are recognised as a group at risk of educational disadvantage, similar to pupils with SEND or those eligible for Pupil Premium.

"I was just a kid trying to survive a home that felt like a war zone."

02 Embed early identification and proactive Support

Implement structured systems for early identification, including transition reviews, pastoral tracking, and analysis of key indicators such as behaviour,

attendance, and attainment. Monitor caring status in school Management Information Systems (MIS) to flag patterns, identify emerging concerns, and target support early.

"No one ever asked who I was, or why I behaved the way I did."

03 Provide specialist training for all staff

Equip all school staff with high-quality, trauma-informed training to help them recognise and respond appropriately to the needs of young carers. Focus training on identifying hidden vulnerabilities, de-escalating behaviours linked to unmet needs, and understanding the emotional realities of caring responsibilities.

"I was judged... no one seemed to want to understand."

04 Appoint a Young Carer Champion in every school or setting

Assign a designated and trained staff member to act as a consistent point of contact for young carers. This trusted adult should coordinate individual support plans, liaise with families and external agencies, and advocate for young carers' needs within the school community.

"When there's chaos in your life as a child, having just one adult who can help you make sense of it all can change everything."

05 Introduce flexible and personalised support plans

Implement Flexible Learning Plans (FLPs) that include reasonable adjustments such as safe spaces, reduced homework loads, flexible timetables, and regular wellbeing check-ins. Ensure that these plans are developed collaboratively with young carers and reviewed regularly.

"For the first time, I felt human... We learned together and played together."

06 Create a school culture that encourages disclosure and reduces stigma

Raise awareness of young carers across the school through PSHE, assemblies, awareness days (such as Young Carers Action Day), and visible signposting. Promote peer support opportunities and foster a sense of belonging through inclusive school environments.

"The saddest part about being a young carer, is that you don't realise you are a young carer; it is just your day-to-day reality."

07 Strengthen reintegration and transition planning

When students move between Alternative Provision and mainstream schools, it is essential that handovers are clear, coherent, and consistently followed. This should include comprehensive reports detailing effective strategies and support measures used.

Ensuring continuity of trusted relationships and preparing mainstream schools to seamlessly continue support will help make transitions smoother and more successful for the student.

"I had to stay after school to redo coursework that my old school had "lost"."

08 Embed emotional support and wellbeing in daily practice

Adopt trauma-informed and relational approaches across behaviour and inclusion policies. Provide access to regulation spaces, time-out strategies, and restorative conversations to help students remain engaged and feel understood.

"Every student had time. Attention. Support."

09 Foster strong family and Multi-Agency collaboration

Work in partnership with families, young carer services, local authorities, and other external professionals.
Build shared strategies that address both the educational and home-based needs of the young carer.
Involve families early, especially during reintegration or periods of crisis.

"Maybe they could have saved our family..."

10 Support research and data-led practice

Invest in ongoing research to better understand what works in preventing exclusion and supporting the educational engagement of young carers.
Share good practice and build an evidence base for system-wide change.

11 Adopt whole-setting approaches through the Level Up Programme

By adopting MYTIME's award-winning Level Up Programme, PRUs and Alternative Provision settings not only gain access to specialist tools and resources, but also embed a whole-setting approach to identifying and supporting young carers. This ensures these learners are not only included, but empowered to thrive both academically and emotionally.

The programme provides targeted training, tailored consultancy, flexible planning frameworks, and the practical tools needed to support young carers through early identification, proactive intervention, and sustainable inclusion.

Crucially, the Level Up Academy is available nationwide, making it accessible to all schools regardless of location. This helps reduce the postcode lottery that too often determines the level of support young carers receive. By creating consistent, high-quality provision across the country, the programme helps ensure that every young carer has access to the understanding, recognition, and support they deserve, wherever they go to school.

We shared our findings and recommendations of this report with the Carers Trust's Policy & Practice Manager, Andy McGowan, and he said: "The new national suspensions and exclusions data relating to young carers need to be a call to action both for government and locally. The fact that young carers are more than twice as likely to be suspended and excluded should be something ringing alarm bells for every school, multi-academy trust, local authority and government. This, coupled with what we know about young carers' attendance must prompt better recognition, but also support for every young carer, in every school. We cannot continue with a postcode lottery where the levels of awareness and support available depends on what school you go to."

By implementing these recommendations, education providers can move from reactive interventions to proactive, relational support. Young carers deserve not only to be recognised, but to be truly understood and empowered to succeed: academically, socially, and emotionally.

Next steps and ongoing work

This report is the first in a series from MYTIME exploring the links between suspensions, exclusions, and referrals to PRUs for young carers. Upcoming publications will delve into key areas such as:

- Life Beyond Referral
- The Cost of Exclusion
- When Exclusion is Inevitable or Appropriate
- Extended case studies, practitioner perspectives, and expert discussions

In addition to our research, MYTIME has launched a pilot AP programme. Schools and alternative provision settings are currently trialling and providing feedback on bespoke resources we have developed to support young carers. This pilot will help us evaluate the suitability and effectiveness of our materials in addressing the unique needs of this group. Schools interested in joining the pilot are encouraged to get in touch for more information.

Our commitment to this work continues. MYTIME will carry out further research to raise awareness, drive change, and improve outcomes for young carers. We urge schools to work closely with the MYTIME Level Up Programme to strengthen early identification, intervention, and inclusive practice. By doing so, we can help reduce the risk of suspension and exclusion for young carers across the education system.

Acknowledgments

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We are also grateful to the professionals who contributed their time, expertise, and insights, and to those whose perspectives have enriched this work.

Our thanks extend to the educational settings, PRUs, schools, and education bodies that provided data, insights, and practice context. Your contributions have helped us create a fuller picture of the realities faced by young carers and their peers.

Finally, we thank you, the reader. We hope this report inspires positive change and supports more inclusive policies and practices, ensuring all young people, regardless of their circumstances, are empowered to succeed.

Please note: Some names and identifying details have been changed to preserve the anonymity of participants who wished to remain confidential.

Glossary

Alternative Provision
Education that does not take place at a mainstream or special school. This includes pupil referral units, alternative provision academies, as well as independent and non-registered schools.

Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)
A plan drawn up by the local authority for a child with special educational needs under section 37 of the Children and Families Act 2014 that outlines the provision needed to meet their special educational needs.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)
Children and young people who face difficulties attending school due to negative emotional experiences—such as anxiety—that result in significant distress. EBSA is often characterised by both emotional and physical symptoms, a strong reluctance or refusal to attend school, and can contribute to a cycle of reduced attendance and escalating school-related anxiety.

Department for Education (DfE)
A government department in the UK responsible for overseeing education and children's services. The DfE plays a key role in shaping policies related to schools, colleges, and universities, as well as supporting children's welfare and educational outcomes across England.

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)
It's a condition where individuals, particularly children, experience persistent difficulties with understanding and/or using language.

Flexible Learning Plans (FLP)
Tailored educational approaches that adjust the school day, curriculum, or setting to support students struggling to thrive in standard routines. They aim to keep young people engaged in learning while addressing their individual needs and circumstances.

Free school meals (FSM)
When a child does not have to pay for a lunchtime meal at school because they are considered disadvantaged. Eligibility includes families in receipt of certain benefits, asylum support or sometimes when they have no recourse to public funds.

Internal exclusion
When a school removes a child from their typical learning environment into a different designated space within the school. The spaces may be referred to as isolation or behaviour units.

Managed moves
A permanent move of a child from one school to another. This should only take place when it is in the best interest of the child and on a voluntary basis.

Management Information system (MIS)
A software system that helps schools centralise information, manage student and staff data and streamline administration. Examples are Arbor, SIMS, Bromcom.

Mainstream school
All schools that are not a special or alternative provision school.

Not in education, Employment or Training (NEET)
It refers to young people who are not currently participating in formal education, employed, or engaged in any form of vocational training.

Pupil premium (PP)
Funding provided by the government to schools for children who have been eligible for free school meals in the past 6 years and children previously looked after by a local authority.

Permanent exclusion (PEX)
Permanent removal of a student from a school due to serious or repeated breaches of behaviour policy, or to protect the welfare of that student or others.

Persistent absence
When a child misses 10 per cent of the school year or more.

Pupil referral unit (PRU)
A type of alternative provision, maintained by the local authority.

Social, Emotional and mental health (SEMH)
A category of Special Educational Needs (SEN) that refers to children and young people who experience difficulties with emotional regulation, social interaction, or mental health challenges that affect their ability to learn and engage in school.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEN/ SEND)
A legal term referring to a child with a learning difficulty or disability which calls for education provision that is additional to, or different from provision made generally available for other children of the same age.

Special Educational Needs (SEN/ SEND) support
Support provided by mainstream schools under section 66 of the Children and Families act to use their "best endeavours" to meet school-identified special educational needs.

Special Educational Needs Coordinator (sendco)
Teachers who are responsible for overseeing and coordinating support for pupils with SEN in schools. They work closely with staff, parents, and external agencies to ensure that children with additional needs receive appropriate provision.

Special School
A school that is specially organised to make special educational provision for pupils with SEN. These schools cater to children and young people with severe, profound, and complex special educational needs, providing specialised support for various needs like autism, specific learning difficulties, or physical difficulties.

Suspension (SUS)
A sanction where a child is sent home for a period of time, up to a maximum of 45 days in a school year.

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