

Young Carers & COVID-19

as part of YACWA's COVID-19 Recovery Project

November 2020



Carers WA

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About YACWA

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) is the peak non-government body representing young people and the youth sector in Western Australia. With over 500 members State-wide. YACWA's work reflects the views of its members, as well as young people, youth services, and youth workers from across the State.

In doing so, YACWA acts primarily as a human rights organisation that seeks to address the exclusion of young people in a rapidly changing society. Our work is governed by four guiding principles: respect, equity, integrity and the celebration of diversity.

About Carers WA

Carers WA is the peak body that represents the needs and interests of carers in Western Australia. We work to achieve an improved quality of life for family carers in our state.

Carers WA is a non-profit, community based organisation and registered charity dedicated to improving the lives of the estimated 230,000 family carers living in Western Australia.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia & Carers WA acknowledge the traditional custodians of country around Western Australia and the Whadjuk Noongar people, on whom's land the YACWA & Carers WA offices are located, and their continuing connection to land, sea and community.

We pay our respect to Aboriginal people, cultures, and to Elders past, present & emerging.

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Summary

In October 2020, young carers from across regional and metropolitan Western Australia participated in a consultation process designed to gain insight into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, to aid YACWA's ongoing COVID-19 Recovery Project.

This report shares the findings of these consultations and also states key recommendations to government & youth sector organisations in order to improve outcomes & the quality of life for young carers and their families.

YACWA would like to thank both Carers WA and the young participants who contributed to this report.

Impact on caring responsibilities

Young carers experienced varying positive and negative impacts upon their caring responsibilities due to COVID-19. Detrimental effects of the pandemic were shared by participants as being; difficulties in managing time & balancing care-taking tasks with education and family time, anxiety surrounding potential transmission of the virus to the people they look after, and struggling to help the people they care for understand the gravity and meaning of the virus (eg. why they are unable to go outside, as well as the physical limitations on affection/hugging.)

However, there were still a handful of positives for young carers. One participant in particular reported the person they care for was healthier than they had ever been during the pandemic due to strict hygiene measures and social distancing. Multiple young carers also reported feeling closer to the person they care for & felt they were able to spend more quality time for themselves and with their family.

Accessing information around COVID-19

Social media appeared to be the primary source of information around COVID-19 for young people during the pandemic. This included Tiktok videos and resources created by activist pages on Instagram. This made data more interesting and easily accessible for young people.

Participants also stated that they found a lot of information from their high schools, who posted on their 'Seqta' - an informational hub for students used by various educational institutions. Other means of finding information were through news outlets, word of mouth and tertiary education.

Young carers felt the media dramatised COVID-19, making it even more overwhelming. Most felt they weren't sure what to believe as there was a lack of consistency across the country with lockdown rules and the naming of lockdown stages in each state.

Mental health & stress

During the pandemic, young carers reported that, overall, their emotions were heightened and they experienced more agitation, both within themselves and within the behaviours of friends, family, & the individuals they care for.

Some found the lack of routine lead to a decrease in motivation to study & exercise. Boredom, feeling 'pent-up', and concerns over missing social and community events were also prevalent issues amongst young people. Additionally, the excessive time spent with family could have the adverse effect of increasing frustration and anxiety amongst carers.

Stress surrounding the increase of debt of WA and the future economic situation was prevalent amongst young carers. One participant was concerned about the reduction of graduate pathways and the negative perceptions, by industry, of graduates who studied online.

Accessing healthcare & telehealth

Overall, there was a mixed response to the utilisation and accessibility of healthcare and telehealth services for young carers & their families throughout the pandemic.

Participants were primarily offered telephone appointment, as alternatives to in-person appointments, however some put off going to the doctor if their situation wasn't urgent.

Some carers were concerned for those in their family who needed advice on multiple scripts or medications at a time. One individual stated COVID-19 did not affect medical appointments for them, but it did affect their parents and siblings as they had several appointments a week. For some participants, the person they cared for had their medical appointments cancelled and were unable to access particular appointments for the duration of lockdown.

Another participant stated the person they care for had switched to phone consultations for their psychologist appointments. However, this individual did not feel negatively impacted by this and was ambivalent to face-to-face or virtual appointments.

Connection to family & peers

A positive impact of the pandemic that was reported by some carers, was the increase of connection with their loved ones and peers. Even if this had to be done without physical contact, young carers found innovative ways to overcome these barriers.

Face-timing with friends between school lunch breaks and face-timing isolated family members was common, as well as an increase in checking in with friends via message. Participants found that social media and stream-sharing platforms (such as 'Netflix Party') were the easiest way to stay connected with friends & family, & these were utilised regularly.

One participant in particular found that video games were a way of connecting and having fun whilst in isolation. This was felt as a positive of the COVID-19 lock down - that young carers had more time to partake in their hobbies with their friends.

However, a participant mentioned that they were particularly affected by regional border closures and were unable to visit a pregnant family member due to COVID. Due to ongoing risks involved, they still have not been able to visit their newborn relative.

Interaction with clubs & community

All participants consulted with had experience of interrupted or cancelled sporting seasons, and found they were unable to transfer physical activities and team sports into an online context.

One participant had some success with attending the toastmasters program online, however missed other routine activities. Other participants experienced cancellation of extra-curricular activities at school, that had previously given them a sense of identity and purpose.

Even after restrictions lifted, some participants found these activities did not resume, while others chose not to participate even when given the option to do so.

Education & remote learning

Remote learning proved to be difficult for most participants consulted. Many preferred face to face contact on campus as they felt they could explain themselves & ask questions more easily in person, as well as increased contact with teachers, lecturers & friends.

However, a smaller group of young carers felt a slightly positive impact - they were able to rest & 'sleep in' more during the transition to online learning, as they did not have to travel.

An increased workload & change of routine made many of the participants feel a lack of motivation to study, as well as the transition to online moving proving stressful. Most participants felt they learnt & retained information more easily with face-to-face classes. Returning to campus after the pandemic proved difficult at first for many young carers as their unique responsibilities in their routines had been disrupted.

In one individual's case, they were given only one Zoom class per subject every week, with the majority of classes being given to older students preparing for exams. Under-resourced and under-staffed schools were noted to be more negatively impacted by remote learning than well-equipped, wealthier schools.

A small percentage of participants consulted with who found the transition to online education easier than others noted that they were enrolled in well-resourced private schools & institutions.

Participants studying during COVID-19 felt uncertain as to how employers would perceive them as students who had less practical experience in their training.

Students expressed a desire for more flexibility and understanding from their teachers to assist with the changes due to COVID-19.

Recommendations

When asked what young carers would like to see understood and actioned by those in power, the following recommendations were listed:

- Provide support for current students who are a part of the "COVID cohort" to support them to navigate the changing employment landscape.
- Increase support and provision of information for teachers to encourage them to be flexible and understanding with their students who are also young carers, particularly during COVID-19.
- Young carers stated that they would like Government to provide targeted, low barrier to entry mental health and wellbeing services. Suggestions discussed were implementing walk-in or mobile mental health services, in order to overcome the difficulty that young people had with creating appointments and calling services (either due to availability or due to privacy concerns).
- Young carers also discussed the desire for Government to facilitate increased opportunities to connect with each other, particularly stressing the establishment of online forums that were targeted at the 12-25 age group. One young carer noted that while they had gained a lot of benefit from camps and carers activities as a child, these types of activities weren't as attractive to them as a teenager and young adult.
- Develop resources to assist young carers to dispel confusion about COVID-19 restrictions and stages across states, e.g. clarifying the difference between Stage 5 in WA vs Stage 5 in Victoria or using different nomenclature.
- Provide assistance for doctors to assist them to continue to operate in a youth-friendly way while delivering telehealth. Specific examples include encouraging doctors to use video call as opposed to phone calls with young clients to improve social interface of interactions.