

Policy Brief

Young carers and education: An analysis of how caring influences educational attainment

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Key Findings – Summary

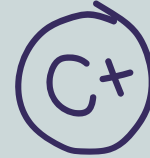
Key Stage 4

Young carers achieve **fewer GCSEs** overall.



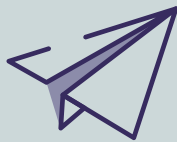
Young carers complete **7** GCSEs compared to **8** for non-carers.

Young carers are **less likely** to get top **grades**.



Young carers have 4 GCSE at grade A*-C while non-carers have 6.

Fewer young carers achieve **5+ GCSEs at grades A*-C**.



51% of young carers do not reach this benchmark, vs. **36%** of non-carers.

Young carers are more likely to have **special educational needs** and disabilities



31% of young carers have SEND vs. 19% of non-carers.

Key Stage 2

Fewer young carers reach the expected levels in **reading, writing, and maths**.



29% of young carers do not meet the expected level in KS2 core subjects compared to 22% of non-carers.

Background

Many young carers remain unrecognised in school settings, limiting their access to vital support services. Identifying patterns of attainment more systematically could help schools intervene earlier and improve young carers' educational experiences.

Objective

This report presents new evidence on the educational inequalities faced by young carers exploring inequalities in academic attainment and key educational benchmarks.

Methods

This study analysed data from Understanding Society (UK Household Longitudinal Study), which is linked to the National Pupil Database (NPD). Young carer status was self-reported.

Key Stage 2: pupils aged 10 to 11 at end of year 6. With data available from 2011 to 2018.

- **KS2** attainment in **reading, mathematics, and writing** was assessed using National Curriculum levels and scaled scores. It is expected the majority of year 6 children will achieve Level 4 or score above 100. Performance was categorised below the expected level vs. performing above the expected level.

Key Stage 4: pupils aged 16 or younger at end of year 11. With data available from 2009 to 2013.

- **KS4** attainment was evaluated through **General Certificate of Secondary Education** (GCSE) number and key benchmarks, including:
 - Achieving **5 or more GCSEs** or equivalent at grade A*-C.
 - Average capped point score, which reflects the total points for the top eight GCSE subjects or equivalents.

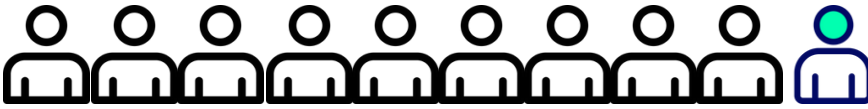
Whilst these data pertain to the previous GCSE grading system this is the only time period when matched young caring self-reports from Understanding Society and NPD data are currently available.

What do we mean by 'Young carers'?

A young carer is someone aged under 18 who cares for a friend or family member, due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction.

Findings

Key Stage 4



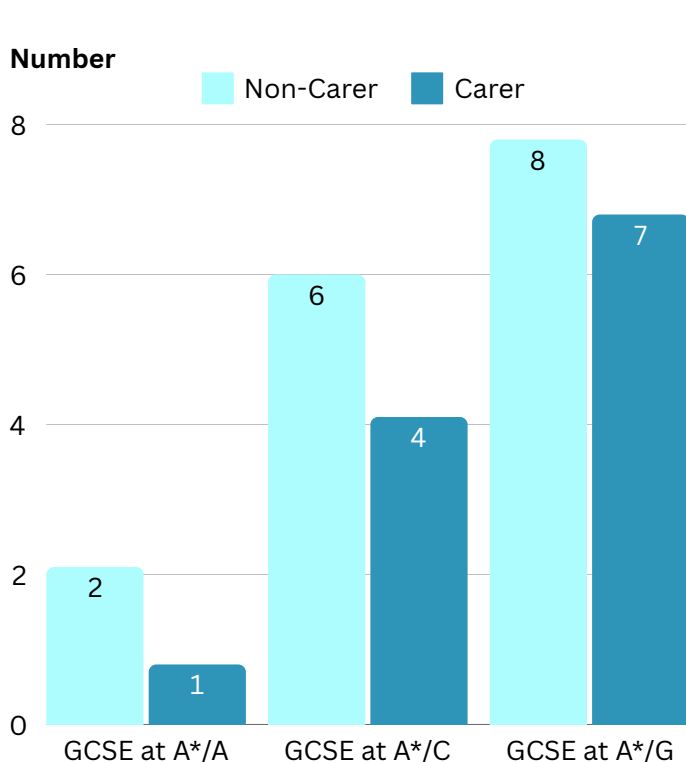
Sample: 2,091 pupils (10.6% young carers)

Young carers are

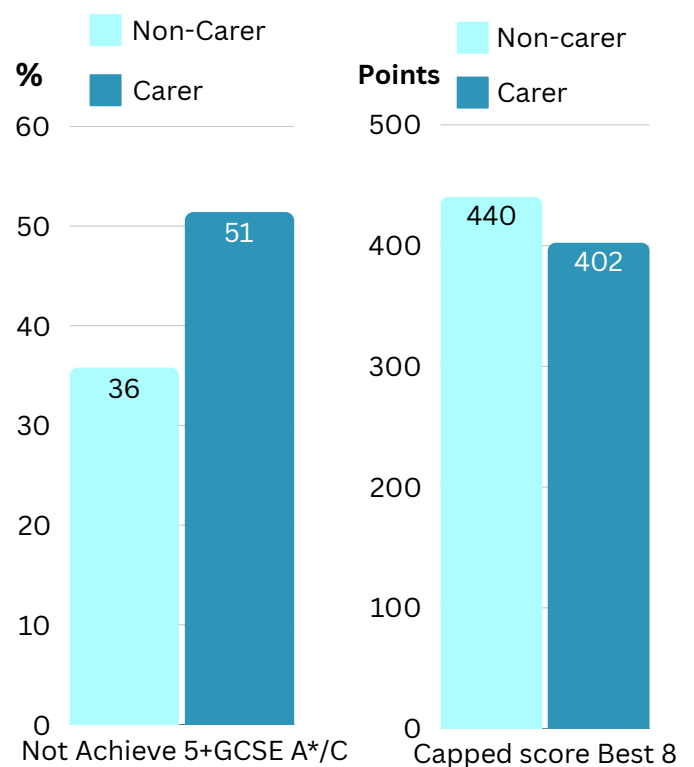
62%

less likely to
Achieve 5 or + GCSE
at grades A*-C

Number of GCSEs



Benchmarks



Young carers achieve **fewer GCSEs** and lower grades

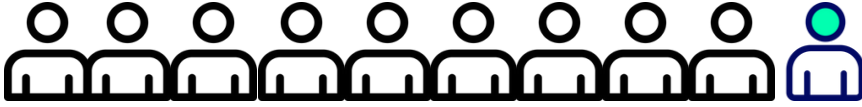
- On average, carers complete 6.8 GCSEs, while non-carers complete 7.8.
- For GCSE at A*-C grades, young carers achieve 4.1 while non-carers 6.0.
- Young carers are 57% less likely to obtain at least 1 GCSE at A*-C grades.

Young carers are less likely to meet **academic benchmarks**

- Achieve 5+ GCSE A*-C: 51.4% of young carers do not achieve this benchmark vs. 35.8% of non-carers.
- Capped point score: On average, young carers score 38 points lower than non-carers.

Findings

Key Stage 2



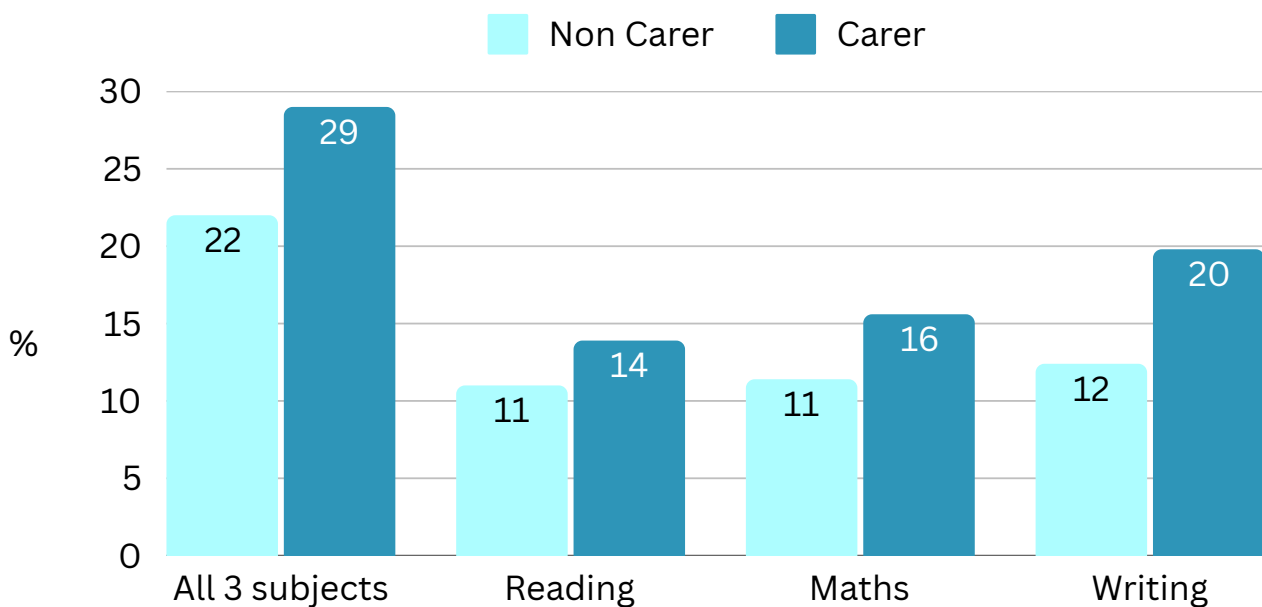
Sample: 1,740 pupils (12.8% young carers)

Young carers are

35%

less likely to perform above the expected level in all the core subjects.

Perform below the expected level by Carer Status (%)



Young carers are **less likely** to reach the expected level in all core subjects.

- **Reading:** 43% less likely
 - 14% of young carers do not achieve the expected level, vs. 11% of non-carers.
- **Maths:** 40% less likely
 - 16% of young carers vs. 11% of non-carers.
- **Writing:** 44% less likely
 - 20% of young carers vs. 12% of non-carers.

Social inequalities

Young carers are more likely to live in **single-parent, low-income** or **unemployed** households, in **deprived areas**, have **special education needs** and qualify for **Free School Meals**.

At **KS4** - **31%** of young carers have **SEND** vs. 19% of non-carers.

Implications for policy

Improve identification and early intervention

The **UK Government** should:

- Provide **funding** to enhance the identification of, and support for young carers in education.

The **Department for Education** should:

- Launch an **awareness campaign** to ensure better teachers understand the challenges faced by young carers
- Collaborate with management information providers, professional associations and carer organisations to ensure that **data** on young carers is accurately collected and reported in school records, census returns and Department for Education data releases.

Schools should:

- Implement **formal mechanisms** to identify young carers early, ensuring they receive appropriate support before educational gaps widen.
- Ensure that needs of young carers are properly considered within transitions between schools.

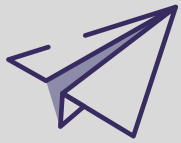
Tailored educational support

Education providers should:

- Be required to appoint a **young carer lead** responsible for raising awareness and ensuring appropriate support for young carers.
- Implement a **young carers policy** that clearly outlines the support available within the school or educational setting.
- Provide flexible learning options, such as homework support, tutoring, and deadline adjustments, to accommodate caring responsibilities.

The **UK Government** should:

- Commit to introducing a **Young Carers Pupil Premium**, a targeted funding initiative to help schools improve pastoral care, well-being support, and academic assistance for young carers.



Conclusion

Young carers face significant **educational challenges** that **manifest early** and persist throughout their academic journey. They are disproportionately represented in disadvantaged and vulnerable conditions, exposing critical inequalities compared to their non-carer peers.

Although these data relate to the old GCSE grading system, they highlight that young carers were being failed by a **lack of support to balance caring and learning** over a number of years. This is not a new, post-COVID issue - it has **existed for years** and without decisive action, we risk failing an entire generation of children. Those young people who were in KS2 in our data are now the young people who the Government wants to ensure are supported into employment, education and training via their Youth Guarantee.

These data should also not be viewed in isolation Carers Trust's¹ recent analysis of more recent data has shown that young carers miss more days of school than their peers who are not young carers. UCAS data also shows that young adult carers are significantly under-represented in higher education with 3.8% of young adult applicants in 2023 declaring themselves as carers, compared with an estimated 12% of the young adult population believed to have caring responsibilities. The amount of lost learning shown through our findings and MYTIME's² recent local research and the longer-term impact on access to higher education highlight why young carers need to be a priority group for all education providers

Data reference

Department for Education, University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2022). Understanding Society: Linked Education administrative Datasets (National Pupil Database), England, 1995-2018: Secure Access. [data collection]. 3rd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 7642, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7642-3>

References

1. Carers Trust (2024) Caring and classes: the education gap for young carers. <https://carers.org/downloads/young-carers-in-education-reportfinal.pdf>
2. MYTIME Young Carers (2024) Unseen sacrifices: Understanding the educational disadvantages faced by young carers. <https://www.mytimeyoungcarers.org/res/MYTIME%20Report%20-%20Unseen%20Sacrifices%20aced%20by%20Young%20Carers.pdf>

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