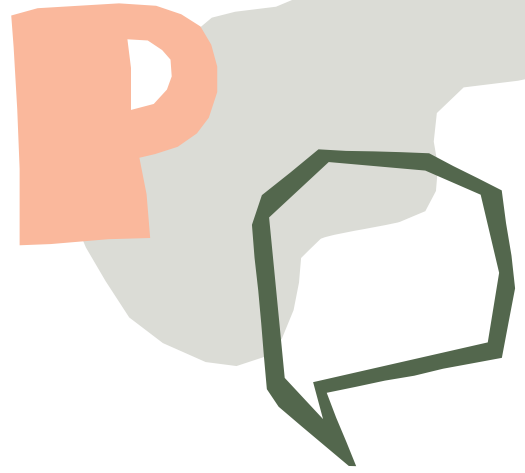


young
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Supporting the mental health of young carers

POLICY LAB

The growing number of young carers in Australia, combined with strong evidence linking caring responsibilities to increased mental health risks, highlights the need for policy innovation to support the wellbeing of young carers. In April 2026 the policy options available were considered by representatives from government, young carer organisations and services, mental health professionals, and young carers themselves. Three policy proposals to improve mental health and wellbeing for young carers were developed.



Mental ill-health among young carers

Caring responsibilities can profoundly shape the lives of young people. While caring can have positive outcomes for young people, caring responsibilities can also lead to negative outcomes, such as social isolation, heightened stress and anxiety, and disrupted education and employment.(1, 2) Young carers are at increased risk of mental ill-health and suicide and, on average, have **poorer mental health outcomes** than their non-caregiving peers.(3, 4) Young carers are more likely to report a mental health condition (19.2% compared with 11.3%) and experience high to very high levels of psychological distress (43.0% compared with 28.2%).

NEED
TO IMPROVE
MENTAL HEALTH
SUPPORTS

BARRIERS
TO SUPPORT

Young people undertake caring responsibilities during a critical period of physical, emotional and mental development, often with limited support.(5, 6) In addition to these developmental pressures, young carers may face related stressors that can further increase their risk of mental ill-health, including school bullying and financial hardship.(7) Despite this, **young carers face multiple barriers to accessing mental health support**, including limited awareness, fragmented service pathways and workforce capability gaps. **Services often fail to recognise** or understand the young carer role and the potential impacts on mental health and wellbeing.(8) **Low rates of self-identification**, stigma and a tendency for young carers to minimise their own needs further reduce help-seeking and engagement with support services.(9, 10)

NEED TO
RECOGNISE
CARING
ROLE

Evidence

Evidence on what supports the mental health and wellbeing of young carers provides direction for policy development. Awareness and early identification **initiatives are more effective when** professionals and other key support figures, including teachers, health professionals and community leaders, are **equipped to recognise and respond to young carers**.(11, 12) Evidenced-based strategies to support young carers' mental health include targeted education and training programs, early intervention initiatives, peer support and services that are informed by the lived experience of young carers.(8, 11, 13)

IMPROVE
WORKFORCE
CAPACITY

Policy Lab

A Policy Lab facilitates the identification, prioritising and development of policies by a group of experts, informed by evidence and focused on a policy question. The inclusion of diverse expertise, including government representatives, enables knowledge exchange to answer the policy question and to extend collaboration beyond the Policy Lab. The Young Carers Policy Lab was developed in partnership with three members of Orygen's Youth Advisory Council, who played an active role in its design, planning, facilitation, and documentation.

Twenty-two people participated in the Policy Lab at Orygen in April 2026. Participants included representatives from young carer and carer peak bodies, the Victorian Department of Education, not-for-profit organisations, support services and young carers. A briefing pack was distributed in advance to ensure a shared understanding of the policy issue, contextual background and available evidence. On the day, participants were allocated to table groups to ensure a mix of perspectives and expertise, supporting rich and broad discussion.

Identifying and prioritising
policy opportunities

The first discussion among participants, working in groups focused on identifying the key features that enable services to better identify young carers and/or deliver effective mental health and wellbeing supports. These were grouped into four broad categories:

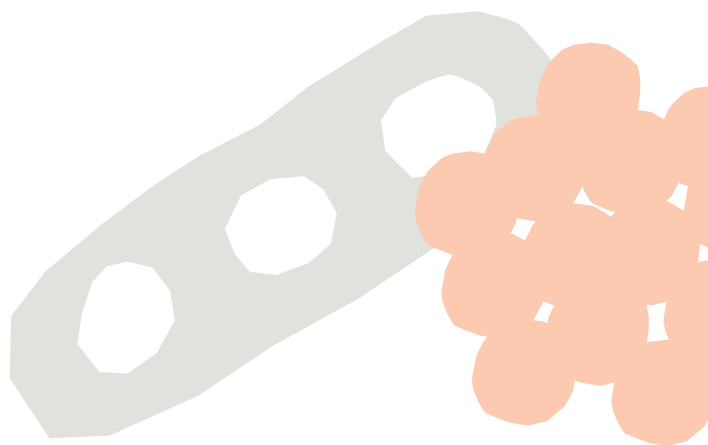
- Proactive awareness and identification
- Expanded support options including peer support and recreational activities
- Co-designed young carer services
- Sustainable funding to deliver long-term support.

Participants then identified a range of opportunities to improve identification and support for young carers. Each table group selected their top two priorities that were reported back and collated. Following the Policy Lab, these priorities were synthesised into three overarching themes:

- **Training and education:** embedding young carer content in school curricula, improving GP training and providing targeted education for new graduates
- **Service delivery:** strengthening support in mainstream services, expanding peer support groups, workshops and webinars to build capacity within workplaces to support young carers
- **Awareness:** improving understanding and identification of young carers, including reconsidering the terminology used to describe 'young carers'.

Participants then anonymously prioritised these opportunities, and the top three became the focus for policy development.

1. **Support pathways for young carers within mainstream services**
2. **School-based training and education**
3. **Mental health peer support.**



Policy development

Priority policy areas were allocated across table groups, which examined the barriers and enablers to implementation, as well as the range of available government policy instruments relevant to each topic. Participants synthesised their discussions and developed summary policy proposals for reporting back to the wider group.

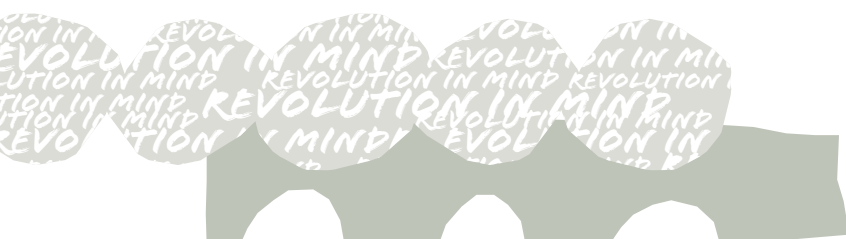
Following the Policy Lab, the data was reviewed and edited, drawing on the collected data. The draft policy proposals were then shared with participants for review and feedback. There was

considered engagement from many participants. One participant highlighted that building a peer workforce depends on young carers first receiving meaningful support, as workforce development and service provision are closely linked. They also noted that placing a young carer peer worker in a service that has not adapted its intake, assessment and delivery to be young carer-responsive could result in the role acting as a bridge to a system that still does not meet young carers needs. Facilitators incorporated feedback into the final policy proposals.

Policy proposals

Support pathways for young carers in mainstream services

Policy solution	Evidence and rationale	Instruments	Outcomes
 Build the economic case for investing in supporting young carers mental health and wellbeing			
Commission a national return-on-investment study to quantify the social and economic benefits of early identification and support for young carers, including the costs of non-identification across health, education and social service systems. Based on findings, develop a national workforce training implementation plan within 12 months of the report that includes targeted mental health and wellbeing supports for young carers.	Fragmented data systems limit visibility of young carers and coordinated responses across service systems. Insufficient evidence limits informed investment and policy decisions for young carers across health, education and social services.	Department of Social Services commissions study and implementation plan.	Evidence to inform investment, policy decisions and support for young carers. Improved workforce capability, service responsiveness and mental health outcomes for young carers. Mandated national implementation plan with dedicated funding for workforce capability building and targeted supports for young carers.



School-based training and education

Policy solution	Evidence and rationale	Instruments	Outcomes
 Embed young carer specific training and education within school settings			
Embed awareness of young carer roles, and their impact on mental health and wellbeing, within existing school-based wellbeing programs, with content co-designed and delivered in partnership with lived experience and carer organisations.	Young carers are often underidentified in school settings, contributing to unmet mental health and wellbeing needs and reduced engagement with education. Schools already deliver multiple wellbeing programs, providing an opportunity to integrate young carer awareness.	The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority identifies opportunities to strengthen the inclusion of young carer awareness within curriculum development.	Increased awareness and capability among school staff to recognise and respond to young carers. Increased knowledge and awareness among young carers to self-identify and seek support. Strengthened referral pathways for young carers.

Mental health peer support

Policy solution	Evidence and rationale	Instruments	Outcomes
 Expand peer-led mental health support for young carers			
Primary Health Networks (PHNs) to design and commission a flexible, needs-based young carer peer workforce by embedding trained peer workers with lived experience of caring across existing community and youth mental health services.	Embedding peer workers in existing services would provide carer-informed support options for young carers. Peer workers can help to reduce stigma and improve awareness within existing services of young carers and their support needs.	Funding through existing mental health funding provided to PHNs for mental health services.	Increased access to peer-based mental health support for young carers. Reduced stigma and greater awareness of young carer needs within existing services.

Supporting the policy proposals

We encourage you to share this report and continue the conversation. Policy Labs bring together people with a commitment to improving young people's mental health, creating opportunities for collaboration and shared learning. We invite you to consider what opportunities there are to further promote and advance these policies.

Participants

Orygen is grateful for the considered and enthusiastic engagement from all participants who represented a range of stakeholders.

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Disclaimer

The findings reflect the discussions and directions of a broad range of participants, but do not necessarily reflect individual participant's agreement or their organisation's policy.

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Acknowledgement This report was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

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