



STUDYING AND INFORMAL CARE

Information and tips for deans and student counselors

Some students combine their education with informal caregiving. You can support them!

Are your students informal carers?

1 in 5 young people grow up with a long-term sick family member *1. Many of them are young carers. They care for a family member, partner, friend or acquaintance because of their health problems. This can be a physical illness or disability, mental illness or addiction.

These students:

- have extra caregiving responsibilities (of an emotional and practical nature)
- worry more often (about others and about their own future)
- live at home longer and do not actually start their own adult life

Within studies that focus on health, society and/or law the percentage of students who provide informal care is higher. Young people with a non-western migration background combine their education with caregiving responsibilities more often than their fellow students.

What does informal care mean?

The care responsibilities of young carers/student carers consist of, for example:

- taking on organisational tasks: finances and administration
- translate or explain
- taking on household tasks
- providing personal care such as dressing, showering, applying creams and assisting in getting into bed
- administering medication
- providing emotional support
- attending hospital, physiotherapy or other appointments
- worrying about how things are at home or how the person who needs care is doing
- looking after siblings

Carrying their worries to school: Quality of life of schoolchildren living with a long-term sick family member - Simone de Roos, Ingrid van Tienen (VU), Alice de Boer, Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau (2020), <https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/carrying-their-worries-to-school-quality-of-life-of-schoolchildre>



What are the potential consequences?

Being an informal carer has both positive and negative effects on the student's life. On the positive side, student carers tend to consider the needs of others and have a great sense of responsibility. They often function independently and autonomously.

Unfortunately, there are also negative effects. Students who combine their education with caring for a loved one are at risk of:

- lower study results
- slower study pace
- increased absenteeism
- less time for extra curricular activities
- quitting their course
- physical complaints (such as exhaustion and general ill health)
- psychological complaints (such as depressive complaints and anxiety)
- difficulties in entering into and maintaining social contacts

What are signals of overburdening?

As a student counselor, you may come in daily contact with young carers/ student carers, perhaps without knowing it. The following signs could indicate that the caregiving student is not doing well:

- withdrawn behaviour
- extreme sense of responsibility and behaviour too mature
- risky behaviour (e.g. drug use)
- absence/quitting their course
- problems in building and maintaining relationships
- sadness or anger
- low self-esteem
- finds it difficult to set their own boundaries
- physical complaints (fatigue, abdominal pain, headache)
- sleep problems
- stress, depressive complaints and/or concentration problems

Why is additional attention important?

Many student carers do not express their concerns. They don't call for help until the last moment; in case of overburdening, in case of (imminent) negative recommendation for choice of study, expiry of the diploma term set by the Office of Education (DUO) or deterioration of their own health. The reason for this late call for help is that these students don't realise that they are carers, they don't know that support is available from the educational institution and they don't know where to go. As a result, they miss out on receiving timely help.

The training institutions play an important role in improving support for this group of students. They can raise awareness about this topic and better communicate about the options for support. They can help students with care responsibilities to successfully complete their course.

Esma: "It wasn't until I got behind on my studies and I was at risk of failing my first year, I told the school that I was a young carer and that the combination of care and study was a struggle. "Read Esma's whole story on mantelzorg.nl/onderwijs

Please note that all the information on mantelzorg.nl is in Dutch.

Advice

- 1 Know what informal care can mean for students, what you can do for these students and whom you can contact with questions at your educational institution;
- 2 Identify students who struggle combining study and care;
- 3 Discuss the situation with the student and show understanding;
- 4 Support where you can;
- 5 And refer to the right person where necessary.

Tips to tackle this

1

Be alert to students with informal care responsibilities

Be alert when you hear that someone in the student's family is has a long-term illness, is seriously ill, addicted or has a disability. Chances are that the student provides informal care and has additional concerns. And be alert to the signs described above.

2

Show an interest and understanding

Student carers often need extra encouragement to talk about their home situation, problems or concerns. They sometimes are very sad, embarrassed or very lonely. There tends to be a taboo on mental illness and addiction. Or they regard what they do as very normal and nothing special. Why would you talk about that?

Ask about their home situation and any care responsibilities at set times. Show understanding and empathise with what it means to a young person when a family member is sick, addicted or disabled. Take plenty of time for this conversation. Focus on the question: what do you need and what can we do for you at the educational institution to support you in studying unimpeded? And less on the details of their situation. Let the young person decide for themselves what they do or do not want to share.

tip

Try using the introduction cards for first-year students. This allows students to find out more about each other. Or show the animation about study and informal caregiving during the introduction to raise awareness of this topic. [youtube.com/watch?v=hCHBcwRQ3RQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCHBcwRQ3RQ). Both can be found in the study & informal care toolkit at mantelzorg.nl/onderwijs.



3 Support where possible or refer

Research shows that students with caregiving responsibilities are most in need of understanding and support from teachers, flexibility by the educational institution, study career guidance that is in line with the personal circumstances and additional time for their studies. In addition, they want an allocated person they can talk to and would like to get in touch with fellow young carers. Accessible information about psychological or financial are also very welcome. For example, if relevant, provide information about the scheme 'financial support for students' (the FOS scheme) from the profiling fund: financial support for study delays.

Are you not the right person to support the student? Refer them to the right person within your educational institutions, for example dean of students, student counselor, student coach or care coordinator.

4 Make agreements or adapt the rules

Student carers benefit if they can 'simply' study undisturbed. This provides distraction, structure and appreciation of who the young person is and their abilities. But in some cases this is only possible if flexible rules are adopted, in order to combine studying with caregiving at home. What flexibility can the educational institution offer? Is there a protocol for young people with a disability or young people who practice professional sports? These will likely contain options, which could also apply to these students.

Students who are informal carers often have ideas about the support they need, such as support with assignments or relaxation of attendance and deadline requirements (Stolk, 2017). Consider what is required per student and per situation. And involve the Exam Board where necessary.

Focus on making structural agreements to prevent the student from having to tell their story over and over again (with each teacher).



Student: “The attendance requirement is what sometimes makes it difficult to stick with it, so if it was more flexible, that would be an enormous help. My father might need my help at exactly the wrong time.

Please note that all of this information is in Dutch.

¹ Health and study outcomes for caregiving students Tienen, I. van, Roos, S. van, Boer, A. de (2019).

Study and informal care is a challenge for both the student and the institution. In Science Guide, 28 mei 2019, scienceguide.nl/2019/05/studie-en-mantelzorg-is-uitdaging-voor-student-en-voor-de-instelling

² Note: Non-EU students or EU students who do not work in the Netherlands are not eligible for the FOS scheme

5 **Use case stories**

You can find videos on mantelzorg.nl/onderwijs in which students talk about combining study and informal care. You can also read about different experiences. It can greatly support students to see stories of young people who are in the same boat. It is good for them to know that their feelings and concerns are no exception. A real-life story can also raise awareness of their own situation and encourage them to look further support.

Real-life stories are also educational for you as a teacher. It provides insight into what it means for a young person to grow up while being an informal carer.

6 **Be alert to absenteeism and reduced performance**

When students provide informal care, their performance may suffer. Sometimes they don't concentrate, they are absent a lot or they have not completed their assignments. This can unfairly create the image that they do not want study or don't care about their studies. In reality, these young people have caring responsibilities, which are not easy to combine with studying. Or they have concerns. Therefore, be alert to these situations and try to find the right explanation for the signs. Look for possibilities together to enable them to graduate or obtain a diploma after all.

7 **Help a student to participate in activities**

Some students with care responsibilities cannot be away from home for too long because they have particular responsibilities at home. This can be an obstacle to activities or excursions. Participation is not always a given. It may be required to arrange transport or a carer at home. Discuss with the student how they might still be able to participate.

8 **Refer to contact with fellow student carers**

Informal carers who study often benefit from talking about their family situation and their feelings with peers who are in similar situations. Perhaps the educational institution itself could organise an activity for students with informal care responsibilities. Or could the dean/student counselor bring young people together as 'buddies'.



Often courses, group meetings or other activities are organised locally for young carers offered by, for example, the support centre for informal care or MEE. Inform the student carer about these options.

5 general tips at policy level to make your college or university more student carer friendly

You may not be the one who draws up the policies within your educational institution. But you can raise the points below with the right person!

1

Conscious teacher = conscious student

- The student often does not know that they are a carer and that there are support options. It is desirable that teachers, deans and study advisers within the educational institution are aware of its existence and the size of this group of students, the risks that affect them and any signals of overburdening. They can point out the support options to the students and refer.
- Give the student the opportunity to indicate at registration that they are dealing with an informal care situation. With explanation of the benefits of indicating this immediately at the start of the course. Naturally, this information must then adequately passed on to the appropriate student counselor.
- At various moments during the course (at the start, around the study recommendation (BSA) etc.) inform study advisers about available support; they could explicitly state that students with care responsibilities can also receive support.
- Use real-life stories from your own students who provide care for someone to increase recognisability and normalise the subject.
- Information meetings or a guest lesson (for example from the support centre informal care or from MEE) on the subject of 'informal care' contribute to this awareness of the subject among students. This will enable educational institutions to reach student carers and guide them to receive support. A themed or guest lesson preferably takes place within the existing curriculum.
- Join Young Carer Week (1st week of June) for extra attention and awareness.



2

Announce in time what options are available

Provide information from the start about personal and/or inclusive education. Who should the student get in touch with when they experience obstacles during the course of their study? Communicate clearly which support options are available, at different times (introduction, individual conversations, study recommendation) and in different formats (in conversations, brochures, website). Provide one point of contact and online communication options.

Use this sample text for a flyer (to be distributed during the introduction) and for a text on your website. You will find tools at mantelzorg.nl/onderwijs to help you with this.



3 Create a positive image of the student carer

Asking for help is difficult, it indicates a weakness. Talk to students with informal care responsibilities about strength and added value. The student also learns a lot from their personal situation, for example in terms of social skills and planning. Approach the student rather as an expert instead of someone who needs support. Emphasise the togetherness: together you will look for ways to help the student successfully complete their studies.

4 Develop a guideline

A guideline can help identify students with care responsibilities earlier (Van der Werf et al., 2019) and prevent or mitigate problems with this particular group of students. A directive can provide deans, student counselors, teachers and members of the exam committee with the right tools. Parts are:

- **General Knowledge on the subject**
- **Vision:** How do we look at students who combine their studies with caring for a loved one?
- **Responsibilities:** who does what to ensure that these students with a care responsibility can get through their studies as successfully as possible?
- **Pillar 1: Informing and identifying**
 - How do we increase awareness among students and staff?
 - How do we inform students?
 - What support or facilities are available to students?
 - Who should they get in touch with?
 - 1 contact person/information point
 - What signals should we be alert to?
- **Pillar 2: Making it open for discussion**
 - How do you have a conversation with a student about combining study + caregiving?
 - When do you discuss this subject? Include the subject of informal caregiving as a fixed subject in conversations that the educational institution already schedules with students, for example during conversations in the context of career guidance.
 - Who conducts these conversations?
- **Pillar 3: Support**
 - What guidance is available? What options in terms of flexibility is available (programme, homework, tests, attendance, exemptions, internship)? Where can the student go for emotional support? Does the training facilitate contact with fellow student carers?
 - How can an Exam Board accommodate these students and continue to guarantee the level and quality of the assessment at the same time?
 - To whom (internal and external) do you refer the student for better support? Create a social map.

View the subject broadly, it concerns person-oriented and/or inclusive education. Maybe you already have a policy on that and caregiving students are just an additional target group. Existing facilities for professional sports or students with a disability could also help these students. By considering the differences between students from the start of the course and test development fewer individual adjustments will be required. Also refer to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Involve students in drawing up the guideline and reward this input of real-life experience, for example with study career points or compensation.

5 Toolkit

The MantelzorgNL toolkit helps you to support students who combine their education support with informal caregiving responsibilities earlier and better. You will find videos and real-life stories that you can use for your own website, on social media and in your newsletter. You will also find a sample text for a flyer for students (convert to your own house style), posters, good examples of other educational institutions etc.

mantelzorg.nl/onderwijs

Sources (mostly in Dutch):

- Brainstorming session with CINOP, Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Windesheim, Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, Hogeschool Utrecht, Movisie, JMZPro and ZwolleDoet! 12 February 2020
- Impuls Cahier (spectrumelan.nl and zorgbelanginclusief.nl)
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- L. M. Stolk, M. H. Kwekkeboom (2019). Expert lab student carers, report of the pilot carried out at the HVA autumn 2018 <https://bit.ly/2SQHMTO>

