A friend indeed: the case for befriending young carers

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A FRIEND INDEED

The case for befriending young carers

Jo Aldridge and Saul Becker

Young Carers Research Group
Policy and Practice Series
A Friend Indeed

The Case for Befriending Young Carers

Jo Aldridge and Saul Becker

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Foreword

Young Carers Research Group Policy and Practice Series

This is the first in an occasional series of publications from the Young Carers Research Group aimed at encouraging new thinking, policy and practice concerned with the needs of young carers. The publications, written by members of the Young Carers Research Group and others working directly with young carers, cover specific areas for policy and service development. They are written for practitioners and policy makers who need to engage with new ideas and new models of working, for the benefit of young carers.

The publications are intended to stimulate discussion and debate. The authors, via the Young Carers Research Group, welcome your written comments. Please send these to Dr Saul Becker, Director, Young Carers Research Group, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE11 3TU. If you would like to submit a manuscript for publication in the series, or would like to discuss possible ideas, please contact Dr Becker directly.
Introduction

Children have been undertaking primary caring responsibilities in the home for many years, indeed, for centuries. However, they have remained a hidden and neglected, private workforce. Until relatively recently the issue of young caring was new to the social policy agenda. This same novelty can also be applied to the notion of a ‘befriending’ service for young carers.

The idea of a befriending scheme aimed specifically at children who care emerged from the results of two previous pieces of research in which we examined the lives, experiences and needs of young carers and a follow-up study looking at young caring from the perspective of the parent or care receiver (Aldridge and Becker, 1993, 1994). The impact of the two subsequent reports (Children Who Care: Inside the World of Young Carers and My Child, My Carer: The Parents’ Perspective) based on the personal accounts of the child carers, and later their parents, was far reaching. A great deal of attention (from both the statutory and voluntary sectors, as well as the media) suddenly focused on the plight of children who were undertaking many domestic and personal or intimate caring responsibilities for parents or other relatives in the home. The Carers National Association, through its National Young Carers Officer, has been central in generating this interest. The effects of such attention have been manifold and have included an Early Day Motion in Parliament, collaboration between young carers workers across the country and the instigation of a national and international awareness raising strategy that continues today (see for example Becker, 1995).

The original research (Aldridge and Becker, 1993) uncovered a picture of neglect. Young carers’ lives were often painful and distressing, made more so by the neglect of family members, the local community and professionals who were paid to care. Looking to the future, our intention was to outline a plan of care and provision for these children based on their expressed needs. It soon became clear that the most common and urgently expressed need by all the children interviewed in the initial study was for ‘someone to talk to’ - someone they could trust, who would listen and understand their lives both as children and as carers.

For many of the children interviewed in the initial research, it was the first time they had ever spoken about their lives and experiences as carers and for most it proved to be a cathartic experience. The study highlighted the fact that often all child carers required to avert crises in their lives was someone who would listen to their concerns, fears and needs - someone who would, in effect, be ‘their friend’.

Significantly, none of the children expressed a need to talk about their lives and experiences in a group situation, what they particularly requested was one-to-one friendship. Thus, it was decided, when planning future provision, to use a befriending model based on the formation of one-to-one relationships between a volunteer befriender and young carer.

To help form the basis and structure of such a project we would look to other models. However, it appeared that befriending models aimed at children were at a premium - those aimed specifically at young carers virtually non existent. Further investigation revealed that there were few exemplars from which to learn any lessons when working with young, vulnerable children who were undertaking all the caring responsibilities associated with adulthood.

However, certain models that targeted adult service users (as well as those similar to befriending that involved advocacy and representation for children) were considered relevant in terms of working with young carers, for example, the ‘Buddying’ scheme for people with AIDS and symptomatic HIV (currently only in the United States do children with HIV/AIDS have their own ‘Buddies’). It soon became apparent we were looking at schemes and projects which were divided into three distinct categories:

- befriending services for adults;
- befriending type services for children (for example, advocacy and representation for children in the care of local authorities);
- specific befriending services for young carers (of which there are two across the country), which for various reasons would unfortunately prove ineffective for our purposes (we will discuss these categories and some of the projects in Part One).

It soon became clear that our work on the principles and guidelines for befriending young carers in all settings would, to a large extent, be path breaking and would serve both a specific and a generic purpose: first, the principles and guidelines would be a crucial reference tool for other groups or
agencies wishing to introduce befriending as a service for young carers in their area, and second, on a wider scale, they would serve to inform other agencies with an interest in children’s rights and befriending children in need per se.

We have always been concerned, however, that the principles and guidelines for befriending (as outlined in this report) should be endorsed by befriending in practice. Thus, the follow up to this report will be a pilot befriending project (which the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation has already generously agreed to fund). We intend to produce a further report in 1995 on befriending, based upon the practical application of the guidelines and principles contained here.

Finally, it must be stressed that our intention in this report is not to set out general volunteer guidelines - these are widely available from many other sources - but to look at voluntarism specifically in the context of befriending children and, particularly, those issues directly relevant to befriending children who care.
Part One

Why a Befriending Service for Children Who Care?

As we have already indicated, the notion of a befriending service for young carers emerged from identification of their most urgently expressed needs. Such a model would undoubtedly be effective in other settings where children are vulnerable and in need of independent support - of a kind which would not threaten the familiar pattern of their lives.

Many children in contexts other than caring have identified ‘someone to talk to’ as a priority. Indeed, advocacy and representation services for children in need - those usually in the care of local authorities - are increasingly recognised as a right and not a luxury. For example, the Advice, Advocacy and Representation Service for Children (ASC) recognises: ‘Research has also identified the need for children and young people to have someone to turn to who will listen to them’ (ASC, p. 2).

Similarly, the Spinal Injuries Association (SIA), who run a Relatives’ Link Scheme (putting relatives of a person with spinal injuries in touch with other people in the same situation) say: ‘Support and information at the early stage can be crucial and there is no substitute for talking to someone with first hand experience’ (SIA, p. 2). On the front page of ChildLine’s 1993 Annual Report, a child is quoted as saying: ‘It means a lot to have someone listen to you and take you seriously for the first time in your life.’

In her work with children and HIV and AIDS, Hongisbaum (1991) has stated that children with HIV/AIDS should have access to independent advice and information and should ‘include a named individual to whom they can go for counselling or advice’ (p. 82).

It is clear that children who are vulnerable, who need outside support to relieve pain and crises in their lives are increasingly recognised not only as needing, but having the right to advocacy and representation. Furthermore, the independent nature of such mediation is crucial. However, until very recently young carers’ needs have neither been identified nor recognised as falling within the boundaries of advocacy or befriending provision. And yet the voices of the young carers in the Nottingham (Aldridge and Becker, 1993) research were loud and clear:

‘[I just wanted] someone to talk to who had been through the same thing.’

(Linda, p. 67)

‘It would be like a best mate helping me wouldn’t it? Once you’d got to know the person sort of thing - they’d know what you were on about and could be your friend for a long time.’

(Alison, p. 68)

Furthermore, these voices are increasingly heard in our daily lives. For example, a recent edition of This Morning (ITV) (11.11.93) featured a phone-in on ‘lost childhoods’. A woman from Essex phoned in to say she had looked after her family since being a young girl when her mother had died. When the presenter asked her what type of support would have relieved some of her problems she said, simply, ‘I just wanted someone to talk to’.

If we don’t listen to these voices then many would argue that we have to question whether children should be caring at all, and instead of looking at ways of providing support for children as carers we should be considering their needs simply as children and thus prevent them from undertaking caring responsibilities usually associated with adulthood. However, young carers will always adopt caring duties, whether openly (with outside support) or covertly (through neglect or the fear of coming to the attention of professionals). Sadly, preventing children from caring by separation from the loved ones they are caring for has been a common response from statutory bodies (see Meredith, 1991). A befriending service for young carers goes some way to reconciling the tensions between child and carer.

In Another Kind of Home: a review of residential child care (Social Work Services Inspectorate for Scotland, 1992) it is stated: ‘A child has a right to her or his childhood, a young person a right to her or his youth. They must not therefore be given all the responsibilities of adulthood and at times should be able to call on someone to act as the advocate.’ A befriending service promotes the latter and no longer questions the former - that is, regardless of whether children should be given adult responsibilities (although it is clear that child carers will continue to undertake caring duties
whether overtly or privately) they should be supported in their lives as children and as carers and
given opportunities to relieve some of their burdens - to unload some of their fears and concerns.

In this respect befriending:

• responds to young carers’ expressed needs for ‘someone to talk to’ and
• may relieve the need for crisis intervention, most commonly in the form of legal
proceedings or separation from families.

Furthermore, in principle (and when successfully implemented) befriending represents the most
benign form of support to young carers in that it is devoid of threat (to the pattern of their lives) and
yet it is one of the most effective in that it gives young carers access to talk in a confidential setting. It
is based on the principle of listening to children - it recognises their right to be heard - without
prejudice or threat of further intervention, or interference.

Some have argued (see Ash and Ritchie, undated) that the term ‘volunteer befriender’ can
suggest patronisation or a condescending approach and we must stress that in a befriending service
for children we would wish to promote, as far as is possible, equality of friendship. Thus, what in the
initial stages would be an artificially created or ‘manufactured’ relationship, would, in principle,
evolve into a natural relationship based on equality and reciprocity.

Young carers’ lives, we know, are fraught with inequalities (Aldridge and Becker, 1993). They
receive unequal treatment from both informal sources (family, friends, community) and formal
networks of support (professionals who are paid to care). They have unequal access to friendships
and social networks, education, services, information and also unequal access to childhood itself as
well as any form of personal development and opportunities for the future.

Our original research highlighted the fact that young carers have restricted friendship and
social opportunities because they are isolated and silenced by the caring experience. Their
commitment to caring can also seriously impede their school lives and this is a crucial factor, for
school is where children meet and mix with their peers, where they ‘make friends’ naturally - the
classroom and the playground are where friendships are often established and where they mature.
But this is rarely the case for young carers. If they go to school at all, their pattern of attendance can
be very erratic and interrupted by long term absences. If they do have friends they rarely keep them;
young friends seldom understand the circumstances, experiences and commitment involved in
caring. Furthermore, for a young carer, home is often not an environment in which they wish to
introduce peer friendships, who have little or no understanding of their lives as carers.

Organised friendships such as those offered through befriending may thus represent the only
real opportunity for many young carers to gain a true friend based on equality of friendship, trust
and understanding. If young carers themselves are unable to create these types of relationships in
their lives, we should be helping to create them, if that is what they want. Befriending should
encourage trust and confidences; it should promote personal development and it may help young
carers to plan their futures during and beyond the caring relationship.

**Befriending Models**

As we have already said, there are few befriending services for young carers, not because the need
for befriending does not exist but because it has not generally been recognised. In contemplating a
befriending service for these children it would be useful to draw on the experiences of other such
schemes to help structure the principles and guidelines for befriending. However, there are few
eamples of befriending services for children - even less for young carers - from which we can learn
important lessons. From an overview of various projects and schemes, it appears that three
categories of befriending models emerge:

• befriending services for adults
• befriending type services for children
• and specifically, befriending for children who care.

Naturally those services aimed at adults are going to be less useful than those aimed at children
(they won’t for example include issues such as the risk factors involved in promoting friendships
between adults - volunteer befrienders - and vulnerable child carers). Furthermore, young carers
have specific needs which won’t be included in those services aimed at befriending children in general.

Unfortunately, there are currently only two projects that are dedicated to befriending young carers. However, from an overview of other services in the three categories, it is clear that we can make useful pathways into the formulation of an effective befriending provision for children who care. We will now go on to discuss in general some of the projects involved.

Firstly, we will turn to those services aimed specifically at young carers: the Sefton Young Carers Befriending Project in Liverpool and the Willow Young Carers Scheme based in Leeds. Neither project has been in operation long. Indeed, at the time of writing the Willow Project was just being established, with a full time worker taking up post in February 1994. They have yet to decide on a model for their scheme. The Sefton befriending scheme developed from a drop-in service and is somewhat informal in its arrangements and practices. Following research on young carers in Sefton, three ex young carers volunteered to become involved in befriending other young carers. These volunteers ‘self select’ a number of young carers with whom they feel they can develop relationships. However, volunteers do not visit young carers’ homes. Although the project has been successful, to date it has run along very informal lines and is currently in the process of evaluation and revision, with a view to creating a more formal service in the near future. Clearly, it will be some time before important lessons can be learnt from both these projects.

As these are the only two dedicated services aimed at developing one-to-one friendships with young carers, we have to look at befriending models more generally, and those aimed at adult service users. One particular model, which we highlighted in the original research as an example of good practice, was the Terrence Higgins Trust Buddying Service for people with AIDS and symptomatic HIV. Indeed, this scheme has proved very useful especially as it has recently introduced guidelines on Buddies and their relationships with the children of parents with HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, the model has been adopted on a local level and both Nottingham and Leicester have their own Buddying or Befriending services for people with HIV/AIDS (the Nottingham Aids Information Project - NAIIP - and Leicestershire AIDS Support Services - LASS). It was especially useful to look at the application of these models in a local context.

Certainly in Nottingham there are many services aimed at children and young people which could, with appropriate awareness raising and applied training, incorporate provision for young carers. There is an Independent Visitors scheme which has just been established under the auspices of the Service Standards Unit, providing advocates and representatives for children in the care of the local authority. Base 51 - a teenage health centre specifically for young people to go for counselling, recreational, legal, education services and specialised health services - has already recognised the needs of young carers and has targeted them as a priority subject group. The newly established Children’s Advice and Advocacy Centre in the city aims to give advice and representation for children in many different settings including providing for the needs of young carers in this respect.

Indeed, it is perhaps no coincidence, considering the research recently conducted in Nottingham, that various projects are being funded to help provide for the needs of young carers in Nottingham. Crossroads UK are funding various projects, including the appointment of a young carers development worker, and a respite care scheme for young carers, and various local agencies and projects are beginning to include children who care in their work.

These and other models referred to in this report were a useful starting point when planning the principles of befriending provision for young carers. However, it is important to be precise and definitive in terms of our own context for befriending children who care, based on our experience of working closely with them. This seems especially pertinent considering the often wide differences that separate the range of befriending type projects, both in terms of the terminology used and the context of application. For example, the terms of reference for both ‘volunteer support’ and ‘service-user’ varied considerably from project to project as did the context in which these were set. Different groups had different priorities in relation to the range of tasks they expected their volunteers to carry out and the nature of the relationship between volunteer and service user.

There were also vast differences operationally - some projects were organised and managed on a very formal basis, others much less so. For example, some befriender relationships with adult service-users were allowed to develop away from the supervision of the project: base. The point to
all this is that we must be very careful and clear about definitions and the guidelines for volunteer befrienders. A project aimed at befriending young carers must be formally structured - we cannot afford to be informal with children’s lives. The philosophy underpinning all our work on befriending young carers must be to provide children who care with the type of one-to-one support that will give them access to a friend with equal status, who will listen to them in confidence and without prejudice, and who will not threaten their emotional and physical lives in any way.

One final issue to be considered when planning these principles and guidelines is that a young carers’ befriending service should complement other informal and formal systems of support. It should not be an alternative to other services. It should not serve as a replacement service for other much needed support and provision. This notion is echoed in the Terrence Higgins Trust guidelines for Buddies: ‘Buddies (should) recognise that taking on tasks that are, in the absence of the parents, the responsibility of the extended family or local authority may delay the involvement of more appropriate carers or services. Such involvement may also mask the need for increased or improved services for children affected by HIV’ (Terrence Higgins Trust, p. 8).
Part Two

Principles and Guidelines for Befriending Young Carers

Introduction

Before we look at the principles and guidelines for befriending, a word or two concerning definitions. As we have already highlighted in Part One, across the range of voluntary, statutory and private provision definitions vary enormously both in terms of voluntarism and befriending and in relation to service-users. Furthermore, there is also much variation concerning what is meant by the term ‘young carer’. For our purposes a ‘volunteer befriender’ is defined as an adult (or young adult) carefully recruited and vetted who will commit time and effort to developing a one-to-one relationship based on trust, confidentiality and impartiality with a young carer. By the term ‘young carer’ we refer to anyone under the age of 18 whose life is restricted because of caring for a sick or disabled relative in the home.

In this part of the report, which is concerned entirely with the principles of befriending, we will set out the stages involved in implementing a befriending service for young carers, turning our attention first to the initial starting-up and policy-making stage.

Stage 1 - Planning Phase

As we are concentrating here specifically on a befriending service for young carers, it is not our intention to set out in detail the processes of setting up a voluntary group per se. Thus, the initial planning stages of implementing a befriending service will be the same as would be involved in setting up any voluntary group with similar ambitions.

For our purposes it would be necessary to work closely with a management committee or steering group who have experience of both young carers issues and volunteer recruitment. A project co-ordinator should then be recruited, ideally someone with voluntary sector experience (organising/working with volunteers), recruitment skills and who has had experience of working with children or children in need.

The planning phase would involve policy making and agreement on aims and objectives. Documentation should make reference to the following:

- project publicity material
- mission statement/aims and objectives
- volunteer agreements and declarations
- person specifications
- recruitment procedures
- recording methods
- confidentiality policy
- references
- criminal convictions
- vetting
- code of ethics
- equal opportunities policy
- health and safety at work
- insurance
- union membership
- child protection procedures
- rules and guidelines for befrienders
- rules and guidelines for young carers
- recruitment of staff/volunteer admin staff
- training
- awareness raising strategies
- media work

Stage 2 - Recruitment and Selection

The recruitment of volunteers to work as befrienders (and also administration/support staff) could be carried out either by a recognised agency or through collaboration between the befriending service’s staff and management committee and local expertise. Recruitment and selection procedures should have been identified and agreed upon in the initial planning phase. Various methods could be employed to attract volunteers to work as befrienders, perhaps through information evenings, publicity using the local press, or appeals. Information evenings are commonly used as they provide voluntary groups with the opportunity to discuss, informally, their needs and expectations as well as their aims and objectives. Application forms (which should ask
for references) should be distributed at this stage. In addition, all potential volunteers should be made aware precisely of the commitment involved and of the agency’s recruitment policy.

References

When working with children in such a setting (i.e., developing one-to-one relationships between adults and children) it is essential that references are asked for and followed up. If any potential volunteer is not willing to provide names for references then their application should not be pursued. The names of referees should not include relatives and should be people who have experience of the candidate’s character and skills and especially their ability and suitability to work on a one-to-one basis with a child. The nature and context of the work involved should be made very clear to the referee. If there is any doubt or concern about comments made by a referee, these should be followed up by personal contact. We would suggest that a minimum of two references be sought, although three would be preferable.

It is important to stress that the time between recruitment procedures and invitation to interview must not be too long. Volunteers could lose interest if they are kept waiting. Once applications are received and references followed up, those selected volunteers should be asked either to attend an informal group meeting or an interview. Here all aspects of the work involved in befriending and voluntarism should be covered and candidates should be made familiar with the agency’s various codes of practice and agreements.

In line with new Home Office guidelines (Smith, 1993), it is important that at least one interviewer has experience of working with children and is trained in interviewing applicants for work with children and it is equally important that all interviewees bring with them some form of identification which includes a photograph.

From the point of view of the applicant it is also important that time and care are taken at this stage, ‘the evidence suggests that volunteers do equate the amount of care taken over their appointment with how highly the agency concerned values its volunteers’ (Whitcher, 1992, p.7).

Children using befriending services are in a very vulnerable position and it is imperative that young carers are protected from any potential or real harm or neglect by the volunteer befriender. It is in the best interests not only of the children but also of the volunteers to ensure that their welfare is safeguarded when participating in befriending. There are various ways of protecting young carers as service users and of ensuring that the befriending experience is safe, protected and rewarding.

Vetting and Police Checks

There are two issues involved here: who has access to police checks; and their effectiveness. Presently, only national voluntary organisations and statutory funded agencies can use the police checking system. Other agencies must rely on alternative safeguards, for example the Department of Health Consultancy Service - for those who have substantial access to children. Here, names are checked against a register of people who received convictions when employed in child care or were dismissed because of misconduct - those people for whom it would be inadvisable to have any further involvement with children.

There is also available the Department of Education and Science’s register ‘List 99’ which includes those people who may not be employed as teachers or youth workers.

These methods should be as effective as police checking, but no vetting practices should be regarded as a substitute for thorough recruitment procedures. It must also be stressed that police checks can take time, during which volunteers could become discouraged and withdraw from volunteering.

Clearly, some organisations adopt a civil liberties perspective in terms of vetting while others see it merely as an additional safeguard. However, screening volunteers should perhaps be considered a suitable deterrent for potential abusers from working in the voluntary sector. This leads us to question the inequalities involved in access to screening procedures - why shouldn’t all agencies and groups, regardless of status have access to the police checking system? In the spirit of equality, police checks, either as a deterrent or further safeguard, should surely be available to all groups. However, the new guidance from the Home Office makes no new proposals for changing the current position on police checks. As the authors of One Scandal Too Many suggest: ‘...if the need
for police checks is accepted as government policy in relation to some employment involving substantial unsupervised access to children, then it must be dangerous as well as inconsistent to limit the availability of checks in the voluntary and private sectors (Report of a Working Group Convened by the Gulbenkian Foundation, p. 140).

The Gulbenkian Foundation Working Group argue for the logical extension of the police checking service to all groups. Certainly, for our purposes, it would seem an essential augmentation especially considering the fact that government recommendations are increasingly shifting away from what is the quintessential spirit of befriending - unsupervised, one-to-one relationships between adults and (in our case) children (Smith, 1993, p. 6).

**Further Safeguards**

It is certainly true that regardless of the status of an organisation or agency, rather than relying solely on police checks further measures must be taken in order to safeguard the welfare of children. For example, thorough interview procedures, extra references, close supervision and user feedback.

It is quite clear that where a befriending service for young carers is concerned we must strive to serve their most urgent needs, promote their rights, but at the same time protect them from harm. These objectives need not be mutually exclusive nor contradictory.

We must ensure that young carers are able to use befriending relationships to help them manage their lives as children and as carers and to do this in safety. Clearly this is more difficult when recommendations suggest less unsupervised activity with children and more control over their environments particularly where they are vulnerable. Young carers may well want to base their befriending relationships outside other alliances and this might mean conducting them away from the home, possibly away from the influence of the care receiver. Thus, in order to protect them we must be especially precise about the conditions under which befriending is allowed to develop by providing clear guidelines for befrienders (and young carers) about the nature of the befriending relationship. This need not contradict the expectation that the relationship should develop naturally but appropriate parameters are essential. Many befriending services lay down very clear guidelines or rules for their volunteers. The Terrence Higgins Trust for example sets out, literally, a list of do’s and don’ts which they expect their volunteers to understand and apply when conducting their relationships with service users.

A further safety measure should ensure that the young carer has access to an independent person outside the service and the channels of communication between the young carer and the independent representative should be clearly explained to the child/young person and should remain open at all times. It is also crucial, as we have already said, that the relationship must not be allowed to develop independently from the service, its management and policies.

There should be a probationary period for the volunteer befriender (which should also be explained to the young carer) during which there should be increased supervision. Thus it may be necessary to include a third party during the initial meetings between the befriender and young carer. As long as this is explained fully to the young carer and organised discreetly, sensitively and with negotiation it need not impinge on the successful development of the befriender/young carer relationship.

‘Protection from abuse should become an integral part of the policy and practice of all organisations working with children’ (Smith, 1993, p. 6). Clearly, the service should have its own policy statement on safeguarding the welfare of children and this should be understood by all staff members. Furthermore, guidelines must be issued on how to deal with the disclosure or discovery of abuse - in our case with reference to Nottinghamshire Child Protection Procedures and guidance from the local SSD’s Child Protection Team. The protection of children in all contexts should form an integral part of the training and should be included in the service’s policy on confidentiality.

**Confidentiality**

In order to further protect the rights and well being of young carers a policy on confidentiality should be negotiated and drawn up. Young carers must feel that they can place their trust in both the service and the befriender and that anything they disclose would not involve intervention from
sources outside the service. However, there are instances where confidentiality must be breached if the service and its staff are to fully protect the welfare and well being of young carers (and also those of the volunteer befrienders).

Although offering a confidential service, with provisos, is an apparent contradiction, in the final instance the lives of the children must be protected. Many organisations whose objectives are to serve the needs of young and vulnerable children face such a dilemma but as far as befriending is concerned the balance must be struck between the child’s need for a confidential setting in which to base their friendships and, objectively, the protection of their physical and emotional well being.

Arguably the service should not be advertised or promoted as a confidential service but the young carers should be made to understand that the befriender would not break confidences unless under exceptional circumstances (see below) and these circumstances should be fully explained. Issues of confidentiality must be addressed and discussed from the initial point of contact when a referral is made. It should also be made clear to the young carer that consent would always be sought where it was deemed necessary to breach confidentiality.

Any case notes or files on the service user should be strictly confidential, kept to a minimum and stored securely. Young carers should have access to all information stored about themselves. Furthermore, any media or publicity work carried out by the service must not breach confidentiality.

Confidentiality - guidelines

1. All volunteers must know, understand and abide by the confidentiality policy.
2. All volunteers should know and understand the policy on the discovery and disclosure of abuse.
3. Befrienders should not involve other volunteers in the befriending relationship.
4. Befrienders should not introduce others into the befriending relationship unless explicitly requested by the service user.
5. Befrienders should not talk to the media about the relationship or encourage the service user to do so.
6. Exceptions to the confidentiality policy include:
   a. Where a child has specifically requested the befriender involves others in the relationship, or requests further support;
   b. Where the service user, care recipient or befriender is considered to be at serious risk from physical, mental or sexual abuse or neglect.
7. Procedures:
   a. Breaking confidentiality should not be the sole responsibility of individual befrienders (unless a child’s life is considered to be at risk). Befrienders should liaise with the volunteer co-ordinator at all times.
   b. Breaking confidentiality should be a service decision and the director or volunteer co-ordinator should be responsible for making referrals to local SSD.
   c. The service should support young carers in the possible consequences or outcomes of the above action.
   d. Young carers should always be told of the need to break confidentiality, why the need has arisen and the possible outcomes should be explained and discussed.
   e. Consent to break confidentiality should always be sought from the young carer. If this is refused, the young carer should be informed of all decisions made and offered support throughout.
8. Breaking confidentiality, if not in line with the above guidelines, should carry serious disciplinary consequences.

Due consideration and application of all the above issues should ensure the safety of young carers when participating in befriending relationships. However, it is important to remember that young carers are both children in need and potentially children at risk and in extending this notion it is clear that young carers are at risk as carers - risk from physical and emotional harm (not only potentially from the parent/care receiver but also from the effects of caring). We know only too well
the form these can take both in terms of physical injury (from lifting etc) and psycho-social impairment (restricted educational, career and friendship opportunities - see Aldridge and Becker, 1993). Many parents/care receivers are aware of the potential risks and the impact of caring on their children, but often feel powerless to do anything about this (see Aldridge and Becker, 1994). In effect, we are saying that such risks are perpetuated and reinforced by neglect - from professionals who could and should help but who, at present, are failing to identify and support young carers in the community.

**Stage 3 - Training**

Although the issue of young carers is a relatively new one, potential resources for training purposes are fortunately not as scarce. Indeed there is a growing body of both research material and information resources as well as applied training packages aimed specifically at professionals working in the field of child and family care. Furthermore, expertise on the subject of young carers is also growing.

When considering a training structure for a young carers befriending service it is important that it should not be seen as an aid to selection or recruitment. Training sessions may well provide the final opportunity for volunteers to withdraw from befriending, but this should not be the main objective of training provision.

On a practical level training sessions should take place at convenient times for people who may be in full time work (ie in the evenings or at weekends) and they should take place over several sessions in order to cover all the relevant material, to ensure the befriending relationship has the best possible support and to allow volunteers to digest any information provided as further reading (which should not be viewed as enforced ‘homework’ but as a necessary part of the commitment to the befriending role).

The initial training sessions should be compulsory, with only ongoing additional training as optional (but volunteers should be expected to attend a minimum number of optional sessions, otherwise their appointment should be reassessed). Although this may sound somewhat draconian, it is imperative the service maintains regular communication with befrienders - we have already stressed that in order to safeguard the welfare of children the befriending relationship could not afford to become independent of the service. Attendance at training sessions should thus be seen as an indication of a volunteer’s commitment to the service and the befriending relationship.

We do not intend the following guidelines to be definitive, but to provide a general outline of the sort of training package that would complement a young carers’ befriending service incorporating general information on voluntarism, information about the service itself, befriending requirements, working with children and young carers’ issues. Below we outline the compulsory element of the training - essential for volunteers to become befrienders (the optional, on-going training should help volunteers maintain and develop their befriending role).

**1 - Service Training**

- introduction - background of service and young carers’ issues
- expectations
- service agreements
- insurance
- union membership
- expenses
- benefits
- codes of practice
- health and safety at work
- equal opportunities
- grievance procedures
- confidentiality
- volunteer guidelines
The above session/s may include collaboration with relevant experts or guest speakers to discuss particular issues.

2 - young carers issues
   - background - research, data, definitions
   - awareness raising
   - case studies
   - social security/income issues
   - medical issues
   - social issues
   - race/culture/religion issues
   - community care/informal care
   - professional response to young carers
   - crises support

The above session/s may also include guest speakers as well as the use of audio visual material, research findings, media coverage of the issue and documentary evidence. The Young Carers Research Group is currently preparing training materials for use by professionals.

3 - the befriending role
   - requirements - information giving; welfare rights; other services; listening skills
   - expectations
   - benefits/rewards
   - nature of relationship - rules and guidelines; boundaries and parameters
   - befriender’s support network
   - befriender’s relationship with parents/care receiver
   - significant others

4 - working with children
   - children’s rights
   - children at risk/legislation
   - duty to report
   - child protection procedures - state guidance and local policies
   - exploration of adult/child relationships

Training sessions should take the form of both group and one-to-one work and should include brainstorming, exercises and role playing. Case studies should be used as well as video and audio cassettes and the verbatim accounts of young carers. It would also be useful to include the experiences of others working in the field. Attitudes should be explored such as prejudices and issues of equality as well as ways of dealing with a range of situations. This should also include orientation, which allows volunteers to feel something of the predicaments experienced by those they are aiming to befriend. Thematic discussions might also include death, dying and bereavement.

Although it should be made clear that befrienders would not be expected to be experts in the field of medicine or welfare rights, general training on both should be provided. However, once matching has taken place, befrienders should be given an appropriate briefing on the case history of the young carer including medical information and welfare rights issues so the befriender can answer general questions, allay any fears and offer further support if necessary. Befrienders should also be made aware of specialist agencies that can provide appropriate advice or information (eg welfare rights units etc).

Guest speakers during compulsory and additional training sessions could also include ex young carers; other befrienders; children’s rights workers etc. Training should be evaluated by
volunteers and trainers alike and updated and revised where necessary. Thus, each session should conclude with debriefing and evaluation and volunteer feedback invited and encouraged.

Stage 4 - Access to the Service

In order to encourage young carers to use the befriending service, there must be an initial awareness raising and promotional campaign, as we suggested earlier. One of the problems likely to be encountered is that children who care often do not recognise themselves as young carers. They may have been managing the family’s domestic affairs for some time and taking primary caring responsibility for, say, a parent in the home without ever recognising their role as a caring one. Therefore, it is essential that young carers are:

- made aware of the service
- encouraged to examine their needs and
- encouraged to use the service if befriending is identified as one such need.

Thus, any promotional work, while advertising the service’s existence, must be conducted in child oriented ways, both in its use of language and in appropriate settings. It must emphasise definitions and roles, perhaps using examples of case studies so children can recognise themselves as carers. Children must be encouraged to approach the befriending service in the knowledge that any approaches they make will be treated with understanding and sensitivity. Unlike other befriending (and befriending type) services for adults, the majority of children currently don’t have access to existing networks of support as young carers - befriending may be the only support available to them.

Children may make self-referrals (although certainly initially at least this is less likely than referrals from professionals). However, they may not have discussed befriending or access to the service with their parent/care receiver. Indeed, an approach to the service may well be in direct opposition to the parents’ wishes. The intention of a befriending service for young carers is to provide a dedicated service aimed specifically at fulfilling their needs. However, because the role of a befriender will be to conduct a friendship with a young carer in the family home or the caring environment, such a relationship must also be conducted with the active co-operation of the parent(s)/care receiver(s). If this is not forthcoming then alternative sources of support should be suggested (such as a confidential helpline, counselling service etc).

Thus, negotiation and liaison within the family would be crucial for befriending to be successful. This would have to be explained to the young carer from the outset and negotiations should be sensitively managed. Reassurances should be made:

- to emphasise that the child carer is the sole recipient of the service and that they have control of how they want the befriending relationship to proceed and develop; and
- parent(s)/care receiver(s) must be involved and consulted but made to understand that they are not the recipients of provision in this instance.

- Furthermore, both parties must be reassured that using the service would not lead to further intervention of any kind that would threaten the caring and familial relationship.

Conflicts are inevitable where a third party (volunteer befriender) is introduced into an environment that perhaps until this point has been hidden, private or exclusive, especially where the target of provision is the child carer (whose needs have probably neither been considered nor identified before). With the appropriate training the volunteer should be able to deal sensitively with such conflicts, observing and understanding parental concerns, while at the same time concentrating attention entirely on the child’s rights and needs.

It is perhaps more likely that referrals would be made by professionals and it would be essential to monitor these closely to ensure that the service did not become over subscribed too quickly thus leaving it open to criticism if referrals were not dealt with immediately. It may be necessary to use an independent agency to make assessments of young carers’ needs (for example, via local Social Services Departments or young carers projects, where they exist). It may also be necessary to prioritise applications to the service in terms of young carers’ needs. A policy decision should already have been made during the initial stage in relation to such issues.
Clearly, those young carers who have specified they do not want the family or care recipient involved will have needs that cannot be met by the befriending service, at which point other services could complement the befriending scheme, for example, a confidential telephone helpline. Furthermore, there are many groups or organisations currently in operation who could adapt their services to incorporate provision for young carers without any significant changes to or extension of their services (for example, telephone helplines for other children in need, carers groups). The matter, once again, is one of awareness raising, not only among young carers but also among these organisations to recognise and provide for young carers in the community.

Following a referral a visit from the service co-ordinator or liaison officer would take place in order to assess the young carer’s individual befriending needs. This would involve identification of specific requirements such as the gender, age, cultural background of the befriender plus practical needs (such as whether the befriender should be a car driver, non-smoker etc. Matching would endeavour to take account of all these needs.

**Stage 5 - Placement and the Befriender/Young Carer Relationship**

From the outset it should be understood by all parties that the befriender will work hard at making the relationship work, but that at any time either the befriender or young carer could withdraw from the relationship (although reasons for withdrawal should be given as well as some notice). However, careful recruitment, selection and matching procedures as well as effective training strategies should ensure that the liaison is a fruitful one for both parties. Nevertheless, it is important to be realistic and accept that the association won’t always be successful.

In order to protect the welfare of the child (and also to serve the best interests of the volunteers) the relationship should be monitored and communication between service staff and befrienders should be maintained at all times. A befriender support network should be established in order to reduce the risk of ‘burn-out’ among volunteers and help prevent minor problems or concerns becoming serious problems or crises. Furthermore, befriending may be a stressful experience for the volunteer and, just as young carers need someone to talk to, it is important that volunteer befrienders are able to talk about their experiences among colleagues (other befrienders and designated support staff) and share problems.

In order to ensure the successful development of the befriender/young carer relationship it is imperative that both parties understand the boundaries or parameters of the association and at all times refer to a comprehensive set of principles and guidelines. By the time placement occurs befrienders must be entirely clear about their role and the expectations placed upon them - these will have been discussed during recruitment and covered in the training sessions.

A primary objective of befriending should be that what initially is an artificially created or ‘manufactured’ association becomes, as far as possible, a natural friendship based on equality and reciprocity. As we have already said befrienders must work within a frame of reference and must consider their role and responsibilities carefully. Their primary concern must be to support the young carer by listening to them and providing friendship in a non-judgmental, confidential manner, but it is also important they are clear about the nature and extent of their tasks within the caring environment.

The essential point is that the befriender should be there to support the young carer and not the young carer’s parent/care receiver. Volunteer befrienders should not be replacing services which should be provided by other bodies. Therefore, any tasks aimed at provision for the care recipient (for example, toileting, bathing) would not be the responsibility of the befriender. Although some degree of flexibility should be admissible and the befriender should consider, in context, the level and type of support offered, any caring duties carried out for the care recipient should be avoided on any long term or regular basis. The befriender should support the child carer’s interests and ‘be a friend’ - realistically young carers would not expect nor indeed want their friends to help them, for example, bathe their parent (see Aldridge and Becker, 1993), just as parents would not wish for their friends to be doing these tasks (Aldridge and Becker, 1994).

Furthermore, caring tasks for adults are the responsibility of other professionals who are paid to care. Young carers are already a covert caring resource, this should not be reinforced by allowing befrienders to become one too. It is equally important that the young carer understands the nature
and extent of the befriending relationship and the rules and guidelines that govern it. They should be clear that their expectations of the befriending association should be the same as those of an 'ordinary' friendship.

Listening skills should be the most important aspect of the befriending role and we must be cautious about extending this role to include empowerment. Most befriending (and befriending type) services include empowerment as their primary objective, but this is less appropriate when considering young and vulnerable children as service users. As far as adult service users are concerned the mechanisms are often already in place to deal with the outcomes of empowerment - there are auxiliary services to support and complement the potential repercussions of the befriending association. However, there are as yet no (or precious few) complementary services or support systems for young carers.

Thus, empowerment is a different issue when the consequences of it receive no recognition from those professionals paid to listen and to care. If we consider the current situation facing young carers, what benefit is there in being given a voice if no one is prepared to listen? What good is there in demanding services that do not exist? At present, befriending may be the only service available to young carers and there is little to be gained from this service promoting empowerment if the consequences of this could also be harmful to the young carers' well being, both as children and as carers - it is still not unrealistic to suppose that a possible outcome of seeking or demanding professional help could be separation from families and the instigation of legal proceedings. Once awareness raising has successfully alerted professionals, in both the statutory and voluntary sectors, to the plight of young carers and their needs, then empowerment may well play a major part in future befriending provision.

A further issue relating to the volunteer's role is that it is important the befriender does not take over responsibilities from the young carer. Our initial research highlighted the fact that it is crucial for young carers to feel they can be both children and carers (see Aldridge and Becker, 1993), thus they would not want their roles compromised by well intentioned but misguided intervention from a befriender.

It is also imperative that equality be the mainstay of the relationship. The befriender should consider the friendship as one based on equality and reciprocity and discard any traditional notions of the interplay in adult/child power relations. Training strategies should ensure that attitudes and beliefs are challenged and any prejudice eliminated before placement occurs. Young carers are carrying out tasks and responsibilities associated with adulthood - they are not children to be patronised, pitied or controlled. However, it is important to recognise that from the young carers perspective it may be problematic to suggest they base their relationship with the befriender on 'ordinary friendships' because many young carers may not fully understand what these are - the caring commitment often restricts friendships and isolates young carers from their peers (see Aldridge and Becker, 1993). Furthermore, when 'ordinary' friendships are formed they are often with other children and not adults.

Looking to the longer term, we have to consider the future of the befriending relationship once it extends the period of caring. Thus, what happens to the friendship once caring has ceased, either because the young carer has withdrawn from providing physical care, the parent/care recipient has been hospitalised or has died, or someone else has taken on the caring role? Certainly, if the friendship was established and successful it would be difficult to bring it to an end.

Furthermore, even though a child may have physically ceased caring it doesn't mean they aren't still suffering the effects of caring, and that they no longer need support. Indeed they may have a greater need for support as they may be dealing with loss, bereavement or indeed the effects of the sudden cessation of a role they have long become accustomed to. Clearly, this requires careful consideration as well as negotiation at a managerial level before recruitment takes place. A policy must be agreed upon and established to take account of such instances when caring has ceased but befriending hasn't, and both parties must be made aware of what happens to the association at such times. However, given the proposal that befriending relationships cannot be allowed independence from the service, if caring ceases and the young carer is still legally a child, then this issue must be considered carefully. However, we should be equally cautious of the effects of terminating friendships suddenly against a young carer's wishes or without providing them with some alternative form of support.
Rules and Guidelines for Befrienders

Here we will outline the rules and guidelines governing the befriender/young carer relationship (which both parties should read and understand and the volunteer befriender especially should refer to at all times). It may be valuable - for young carer and befriender - if both sign a ‘contract’ which clearly states these rules and guidelines and can be used for future reference in the event of any disagreement or dispute. Service staff or the management committee should, from the outset, agree on the level of commitment expected from volunteers and how much contact time would be required. Thus, the context for befriending should include details about where befriending takes place, when and how often. Again, all these details should be entered onto the contract.

We have divided the guidelines into general principles regarding the volunteer’s role as volunteer and the volunteer’s role as befriender; and specific guidelines relating to the nature and extent of the befriending relationship (do’s and don’ts):

General Principles

- Know, understand and be committed to service’s aims and objectives
- Know, understand and be committed to service’s policies and procedures (equal opportunities, health and safety, confidentiality, grievance and disciplinary procedures etc)
- Understand and implement emergency procedures where necessary
- Know and understand guidelines on disclosure or discovery of abuse
- Know your limitations in terms of commitment
- Maintain agreed level of commitment in relation to agreed contact time with service user
- Communicate with service staff
- Liaise with volunteer co-ordinator at all times
- Relate to other volunteers and staff with respect
- Participate in additional training sessions and supervision
- Participate in support groups
- Inform service of any changes in personal circumstances or details (change of address, holidays, breaks etc)
- Give agreed period of notice
- Understand and sign volunteer agreement and declaration
- Declare all convictions for abuse
- Claim travel, child care expenses
- Don’t just disappear

Guidance for Befrienders

- Be enthusiastic and self motivated
- Be able to give and receive support
- Be sensitive to young carers’ needs
- Use listening skills at all times
- Understand the rights of children; the rights of young carers
- Act with dignity and integrity
- Accept lifestyles different from your own
- Be able to deal with stressful situations
- Be able to cope and respond to emergencies or crises
- Work hard at making the relationship work
- Be informed and know solutions (or where to go for advice and information)
- Help in decision making without directing
- Offer reassurances, treat child with empathy
- Make the child feel secure in the relationship
Specific Principles for Befrienders - Do’s...

- Do be mindful of other relationships (work alongside and negotiate with parent/care receiver or young carer’s family as well as other professionals involved in their lives)
- Do approach relationship without prejudice and with equality
- Do treat the relationship as a friendship
- Do accept and respect child’s decision to withdraw from relationship
- Do observe birthdays and festivities (the purchasing of small gifts may be acceptable with prior consent from parent/care receiver)

...and Don’ts

- Don’t burden the young carer with your own problems
- Don’t promise anything you can’t deliver or raise expectations you cannot meet
- Don’t involve other volunteers in the relationship
- Don’t take the young carer home or introduce them to your own children
- Don’t drive the young carer in a car unless covered by insurance
- Don’t direct support at parent/care recipient
- Don’t engage in power relations
- Don’t make value judgements
- Don’t lend or accept money from the young carer
- Don’t allow friendship to become independent of service
- Don’t break confidentiality (except where child protection issues are concerned)
- Don’t break the law or encourage the young carer to break the law
- Don’t ignore violence or law breaking
- Don’t overstep boundaries
- Don’t talk to others about the relationship
- Don’t talk to the media about the relationship (or the service) or invite the young carer to talk to the media
- Don’t try to cope with complex problems on your own
- Don’t contravene, contradict or interfere in child (young carer)/parent (care receiver) relationship
- Don’t be confrontational
- Don’t abuse the relationship or the child
- Don’t give medical advice
Conclusion

It is important to remember that the principles and guidelines for befriending young carers as set out here are not definitive. They provide a backdrop for the context of a young carers’ befriending service and should be revised and updated through on-going monitoring and evaluation. An ‘experimental’ or pilot study would provide an ideal opportunity to put these guidelines to the test and, as we have already said, the Gulbenkian Foundation has generously agreed to fund a preliminary project in Nottingham. This will allow us not only to test our hypotheses but also to learn important lessons from befriending in practice as well as complementing our established knowledge base on young carers issues. We very much hope to produce a further report on befriending, based upon our experiences in the pilot study, and from feedback from this report.

Clearly a primary objective is to implement long term, full time befriending schemes for young carers across the country. It is crucial that the long term befriending needs of children who care are addressed - it would be unfair, if not potentially harmful, to raise expectations among these children by offering befriending services with only short term funding security.

At present there are no services (apart from those already mentioned in this report) fulfilling young carers’ most fundamental need - that of someone to talk to, in confidence and in a setting where friendship is allowed to flourish. We have said before (Aldridge and Becker, 1993) that such a need is not immoderate, nor impractical in terms of its funding requirements. A befriending service in itself need not be costly to set up and could be complemented by a whole range of services that are, in fact, already in place.

Thus, we are not suggesting that befriending should be seen as the only relevant provision for young carers but that other services could incorporate the needs of these children within their own objectives. It was clear when conducting the preliminary research for this report that many organisations, for example, advocacy support services, local and national self help and voluntary groups (carers groups and networks) could include young carers in their objectives without any significant extension or revision of their services. The problem remains, once again, one of lack of awareness. There are far too many organisations which could make a difference to young carers’ lives, but who remain unaware of the issue or of their needs.

By addressing these needs and identifying befriending as a primary source of provision we hope not only to serve children who care, but also to raise awareness to their experience and circumstances among other agencies and groups who could help, but who presently don’t help. The long term aim must be to meet all young carers’ needs as children, and as young carers in the community.
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A FRIEND INDEED
The Case for Befriending Young Carers
Jo Aldridge and Saul Becker

If someone was talking to me and had been through it they wouldn't just know what I'm saying but they'd know how I'm feeling inside, do you understand?

Debra

Maybe I could have told somebody that I was going into my room and crying because I thought my mum was trying to drive me mad and maybe someone else felt the same thing and could tell me what they did about it.

Miriam

It would be like a best mate helping me wouldn’t it? Once you’ve got to know the person sort of thing - they’d know what you were on about and could be your friend for a long time.

Alison

Children who care have said that what they want most is someone to talk to - someone who will listen to them without prejudice and with understanding. In this publication Jo Aldridge and Saul Becker suggest a series of guiding principles to inform the implementation of befriending services for young carers. The issues covered include the selection of volunteers to work with young (often vulnerable) children; recruitment practices; child protection issues; training issues as well as a detailed examination of the context for successful relationships between volunteer befrienders and young children. In addition, other befriending models are examined - for example, the HIV/AIDS Buddying model - as well as other schemes that involve advocacy and independent representation for children. This publication will be invaluable to anyone concerned with developing services for young carers.

Young Carers Research Group, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University

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