

Yes, 8-Year-Old Caregivers Exist

About 1.4 million children ages 8 to 18 are caregivers in the U.S.

By **Anthony Cirillo**, Contributor



Caregiving influences children's lives and development in both positive and negative ways. (GETTY IMAGES)

THIS MAY SURPRISE YOU, but about 1.4 million children between the ages of 8 and 18 are caregivers nationwide. Most often, the family member is a parent or grandparent, with a condition such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia, heart, lung or kidney disease, arthritis or diabetes.

There are several reasons why we have so many **young caregivers**. In families with limited resources who aren't eligible for or refuse home care, children become the default caregivers. The opioid crisis is another reason. The two biggest groups impacted are boomers and millennials. Research has shown that individuals born between 1947 and 1964, as well as between 1979 and 1992, are particularly afflicted. Boomer overdose deaths are 25 percent higher than in other age groups, and 20 percent higher among millennials. While hospitalization rates among the elderly have declined, they've remained steady for other age groups. In fact, boomers have become the first generation to enter their "golden" years in poorer health than their parents.

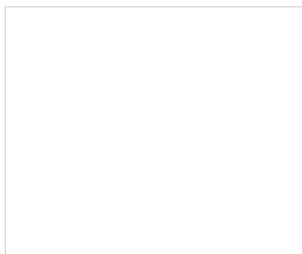
[See: [How Music Helps People With Alzheimer's Disease.](#)]

Caregivers in the Truest Sense

Statistics are probably under-reported, but caregivers are evenly divided between girls and boys, about a third are between 8 and 11 years old and nearly 40 percent are ages 12 to 15. Their duties range from emotional support and helping with mobility to giving injections, monitoring medications, talking to doctors and nurses and changing diapers. It's not just doing household chores – running errands, cleaning up after dinner, walking the dog or other ordinary and expected contributions to family life. They are caregivers in the truest sense of the definition.

Long-Term Impact Varies

Caregiving influences children's lives and development in both positive and negative ways. There will be some who chose their careers because they were child caregivers. Many child caregivers become super-achievers at home and school and go on to have careers in health care. Others fail or drop out of school. Many carry resentment into their older years, as well as emotional burdens beyond their capacity to understand and manage. Those who opt out – literally running away or refusing to help – also pay an emotional price.



[See: [14 Ways Caregivers Can Care for Themselves.](#)]

How Can We Do to Help?

The United States isn't the only country where children become caregivers. But we're at the lower end of the scale in terms of helping these children. Health care professionals need to look at the whole family when creating care plans and ensure the contributions of young caregivers don't interfere with their educational and extracurricular activities.

Some associations have tackled this head on:

- The [National MS Society](#) has special programs for children.
- [Alateen](#) has had support groups for children of alcoholic parents for decades.
- [AFA Teens for Alzheimer's Awareness](#) is the official teenage branch of the Alzheimer's Foundation of America.
- The [American Association of Caregiving Youth](#) has a major program working with schools to serve young caregivers.

Connie Siskowski, who was a child caregiver for her grandfather, founded the American Association of Caregiving Youth's program. After becoming a [nurse](#) and realizing how much caregiving had impacted her life, she created the Association. It provides needs-driven services in school, out of school and at home. The ultimate goal is for no child in the U.S. to drop out of school. The group established the Caregiving Youth Network to raise awareness among school and health professionals and others. It also provides services such as:

- In-school programs: Skills-building classes, support groups and lunch-and-learn sessions.
- At-home programs: Linking families with resources, providing computers, tutoring and solutions for special needs.
- Out-of-school programs: Overnight camp, fishing, dining, educational and fun activities.

[See: [9 Habits That May Reduce Your Risk of Developing Alzheimer's.](#)]

When you realize there's an organization devoted to this issue, it becomes clear that the issue is bubbling to the surface and is probably more acute than we all realize. We can all be more alert to the issue, identifying at-risk youth and [providing whatever support](#) we can to help them succeed in life and as caregivers.

Anthony Cirillo, Contributor

Anthony Cirillo is president of [The Aging Experience](#). He's a passionate advocate for family car... [READ MORE](#) »

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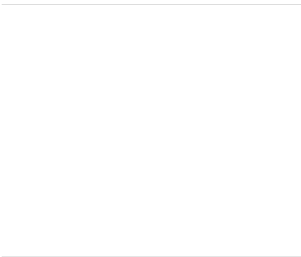
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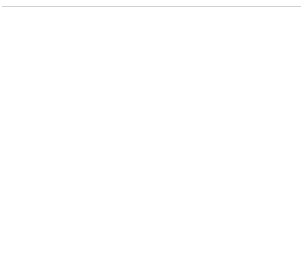
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