

17,000 children are forced to care for mentally-ill parents

By OLINKA KOSTER

Almost 17,000 children face the daily strain of caring for a mentally- ill parent, it was revealed yesterday.

With little or no help from the state, many have to administer medicine to their mother or father as well as providing crucial emotional support.

- [The boy, 15, with two mentally ill relatives to look after](#)



Staying positive: 15 year old carer Ben Saintry, right, with his brother Sam. Ben cares for two mentally ill members of his family

The stark situation was laid bare in a two-year study of youngsters aged nine to 17.

It comes as the Daily Mail campaigns to ease the struggle of child carers around the country.

An astonishing 175,000 children are missing out on their childhood because they are looking after sick or disabled relatives.

The latest study was performed by the Young Carers Research Group at Loughborough University.

Using data from agencies that work with or assess young carers, they calculated the 17,000 figure.

Nearly half of the parents involved had more than one mental illness, it emerged.

Jo Aldridge, who carried out the study with Darren Sharpe, said: "The nature and extent of the responsibilities carried out by this group of young carers is an issue that has never been fully addressed.

"These children often end up running the household single-handed.

This can mean dispensing parents' medication, comforting them, lifting them and doing all the household tasks, but can extend to giving complete care to a parent when, for example, a parent with depression becomes bedridden.

"The children are at significant risk of harm and developmental delay and are highly likely to have their educational achievement and transition into adulthood undermined."

The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

It focused on 20 children in Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire who were caring for parents with illnesses such as depression, schizophrenia and serious personality disorders.

More than 60 per cent of the youngsters lived with single parents, fewer than three per cent of whom had jobs. Three-quarters of the parents relied on state benefits.

One girl, Lucy, 14, explained: "I'm the oldest of five of us. My mum has depression and diabetic neuropathy.

"I help with her injections and help her take her medication four times a day. Some of my friends make fun of me. They've seen my mum in the wheelchair, they just called her names."

Eva, also 14, whose mother suffers from schizophrenia, said:

"When my mum is ill, I have to lock all the doors and we are not allowed to answer the phone because she thinks somebody is going to hurt us. I go with my mum to the doctors and get her prescriptions for her."

The Daily Mail campaign, alongside the charity Crossroads, aims to raise money for respite schemes and other projects to help youngsters caring for disabled, physically ill or mentally ill parents.

They are left to struggle alone for an average of four years before they receive state help.

The problem was highlighted by the case of 13-year-old Deanne Asamoah, who died after taking an overdose of morphine tablets prescribed for her terminally ill mother.

The schoolgirl from Bletchley, Buckinghamshire, had been caring for her mother for four years.

Paul Corry, spokesman for the mental health charity Rethink, said last night: "Children caring for a mentally ill parent can get an awful lot out of it if they are properly supported.

"Our biggest challenge is making sure the Government gets the money to frontline services.

"We want to make sure the children see what they are doing as beneficial rather than a blight on their lives."