

THE BRAVE CHILDREN

looking after Mum

Thousands of youngsters in the UK are giving up their childhood to nurse their ill or disabled parents. But is it really fair on them?

There are currently 700,000 young carers in the UK – some as young as five – who look after a sick parent. While most children enjoy play dates and sleepovers, these youngsters worry about cooking the next meal, cleaning, and whether it's time for mum or dad to take their medication. But shockingly, many don't even realise they are carers, instead they see it just as a way of life. Thankfully, amendments to the Children and Families Act this year will mean that an assessment will be made as to why the child is caring and what needs to change to stop them taking on the responsibility in the first place. Here, Antonia-Rae, 11, and Tom, 10, tell their stories...

'I stopped my mum from killing herself'

From the age of five, Antonia-Rae has cared for her mum, Lesley, 49, after she had a stroke, which left her right side paralysed. It involves bathing her, doing the ironing and helping get her medication. Yet extraordinarily, when Antonia-Rae was just 10, her skills went even further when she stopped her mum from committing suicide.

'I think I've grown up too fast,' says Antonia-Rae. 'Most of the time I feel like I am the adult and my mum's the kid. You've got to be responsible all the time. It's like when you've got a little

baby, but it's not a baby, it's your mum.'

Lesley, from Worsley, Greater Manchester, knows the pressures her daughter faces. She says, 'I'm supposed to look after her. I know that I'm putting her in deep pain and it's not good.'

Last year, Lesley suffered depression linked to problems with her medication, and attempted suicide by cutting her wrist. It was only then that Antonia-Rae was identified as a young carer and offered some support from Salford City Council.

She says, 'I don't tend to go



Antonia-Rae is responsible for her mum Lesley

out a lot because I'm scared that my mum will do something stupid or injure herself trying to do something that I could have done for her. When Mum attempted to commit suicide, she had already called

an ambulance because she was really depressed and tricked me into going outside to check for it. When I came back in I had to

grab a knife off her. I feel it was my fault. I was the one who was supposed to be looking after my mum, and I had left her alone.'

Lesley adds, 'It makes me angry when I think about what I did. I know I'd never leave her. I love her too much.'

Antonia-Rae started senior school in September but is always thinking of her mum. She says, 'I still make sure she's OK and call her every break.'

'It's like you've got a baby'

'The boys suffer with stress'

Words: Sally Beck Photos: Mitropix



Tom does his best to keep mum Vicky's spirits up

'I worry constantly when I'm at school'

Vicky, 35, from Stockport, lives with husband Tommy and sons Joe, 14, and Tom, 10. When Tom was nine months old she was diagnosed with primary biliary cirrhosis, a life-threatening autoimmune disease that attacks the liver.

Fatigue is a major symptom and as Tommy works shifts, Vicky relies heavily on her sons for help. She says, 'Tom's never known any different and Joe's been helping since Tom was born. He'd run upstairs and get the nappies and baby wipes. Whatever he could do he

would, and the minute Tom was able, he began helping too.'

Tom is extremely protective of his mum and his first memories are caring for her. 'I was five when I first started putting a pain-killing cream on her back. I do the Hoovering, take out the recycling, make the beds, tidy round and do some

other chores.'

Tom wants to be a doctor so that he can help others who are sick. 'I like to go to hospital appointments with Mum to see that they're being nice to her. I like to know what's going on,' he says. It's more than touching watching him care for Vicky. He



Tom and brother Joe are happy to care for their mum

'But I don't think she realises it clicks in your head and you can't get it out. If she's having a bad day I don't know if she's going to be OK when I'm not there with her.'

'I prefer to show I'm happy because that makes me feel happy. If I let sad feelings take over, then I feel sad. Adults say they're there for me, but there is nothing much they can do.'

Tom and Joe are supported by Vicky's parents, who visit daily. They give Vicky her medication and clean the house. But when the boys get home from school they take over. They also have respite holidays with other young carers at Signpost, a support group in Stockport, but even then Tom worries.

Four months ago, Vicky had a liver transplant. Until she is well, Tom will be by her side.

Tom says, 'If I had a magic power it would be to cure mum instantly. I feel sorry for people who are more poorly than my mum, and I would cure them instantly too.'

What can you do?

Anna Morris, senior manager at Carers Trust (carers.org), says, 'It can be hard to spot the signs, but if you think someone is a young carer, call the council. They'll put you in touch with the local young carers service. Families worry their child will be taken away, but telling someone just means they'll get the support they need. If you know the child well, suggest they visit young carers.net.'