

Could This Teenager Be Caregiving?

A checklist for parents, teachers, clinicians, and anyone who suspects a young person is carrying more than they should at home

Most teenagers and young adults carrying serious caregiving responsibility do not introduce themselves that way. They show up instead as exhausted, distracted, late, or oddly hyper-responsible for their age. This checklist is a lens, not a verdict. One item on its own could mean many things. Several checked across categories is a strong signal it's worth a gentle, direct conversation about what's really happening at home.

SCHOOL OR WORK FUNCTIONING

- ☐ Regularly arrives late, leaves early, or misses days with vague or inconsistent explanations
- ☐ A noticeable drop in performance or engagement that doesn't match their evident effort or ability
- ☐ Appears "on call" during the day: frequent phone checking, anxiety about being unreachable
- ☐ Avoids after-school or evening activities in a way that suggests they must be home at a set time

HOME AND ROLE CLUES

- ☐ Describes being the person who keeps routines from falling apart at home (meals, supervision, logistics)
- ☐ Mentions monitoring safety at night, or feeling responsible for preventing a crisis (locks, the stove, wandering, falls)
- ☐ Handles tasks that would normally require an adult: forms, benefits paperwork, landlord calls, appointment coordination
- ☐ Acts as the primary interpreter or advocate in adult-facing conversations (medical, school, housing, agencies)

HEALTH AND STRESS SIGNALS

- ☐ Persistent sleep loss, or describes never fully resting even when their schedule allows it
- ☐ Frequent stress symptoms (headaches, stomach pain, panic sensations) without a clear medical cause
- ☐ Expresses hyper-responsibility ("If I'm not there, something bad will happen") or guilt about being away from home
- ☐ Minimizes their own needs, or reacts with shame when offered support ("I'm fine, it's nothing")

“Several clustered yes answers means it's worth asking, gently, what would actually lighten the load.”

How to Ask Without Frightening Them

A young person carrying this kind of responsibility is often deciding, in real time, whether you are safe to be honest with. A few things help: ask in private, never in front of peers or family. Give them control: “Is it okay if I ask you something about home?” Explain your purpose: “I’m asking so we can make things easier, not to get anyone in trouble.” And be honest about limits rather than promising total secrecy you may not be able to keep.

A workable opening line: “I’m noticing you seem on-call for something during school. You don’t have to explain it to me. Would it help if we built a plan so you could check in once during second period, without getting in trouble for it?” The goal isn’t to uncover a full story. It’s to reduce harm.



From Parentification: Caregivers in Crisis by Homer L. Hartage. For the full framework and more support tools, visit the Parentification Resource Center at homerhartage.com/parentification-resource/.