

# James - Care Support Worker.



### My caring role

Nine years ago, our son chose us through the adoption process; it was only later that he was diagnosed with both ADHD and autism. He's now twelve and physically going through puberty, but inside he's a six or seven-year-old child, sometimes even three or four; so, it's a double whammy of dealing with a toddler in a twelve-year-old's body.

His ADHD and autism mean that he has lots of hidden disability issues which can manifest themselves in many ways, so he attends a specialist school for children with learning disabilities. In school he can be a model pupil and excels in sports; but as soon as the taxi drops him home, it's like a release valve and he can somersault between emotions. This can go to the extremes of being silly, happy, angry, or very unworthy, and in the worst-case scenario, can also lead to him destroying items in the home.

### Recognising my care responsibilities

No carer or parent likes to make a fuss about being 'a parent'... or ever consider themselves a carer in the first place. However, I have two other older children to whom I was able to give limited responsibilities at this age, such as walking to school on their own, going to the shop, etc. This isn't the case with our son, though. I see other parents taking their children for sleepovers, for example, but he can't be let out of our sight in that way. When he's not at school he demands 100% of our time – so irrespective of what I'm doing, it's got to be centered on him.

### My typical workday morning

My wife has a senior-level job which means she leaves early in the mornings and works at home in the evenings. We do try and share out the caring responsibilities; but with my wife having such a senior role I tend to be the one who battles trying to get our son out of bed and washed.

Due to his sensory challenges, tooth brushing and eating breakfast is a major issue for him. If he doesn't like the consistency of food, he won't eat it and will throw it on the floor. If the dog comes along to Hoover it up my son sometimes gets cross.

He struggles with attachment disorder, which manifests itself in different ways.

For example, he can dress himself, but he needs talking through it because children who have come from the cared-for sector tend to have lost the nature/nurture part of their life which is a fundamental factor in any young child's early development, so we have to dress him in the morning for him to feel secure. He needs a proper school shirt with the buttons done up so he can feel it on his neck. (He needs this as it's important to him and it makes him feel secure).

We must allow plenty of time in the mornings, even though there's a structure that breeds formality, but sometimes it can be an hour or so to get him dressed. We try and do the perfect parenting regime, by being nice and placid in the mornings but when we see eight o'clock approaching and his taxi is due, it can be very chaotic.

I am very secondary in the chain. I literally put him in the taxi—or take him myself if he won't get in the taxi—and only then can I start my day. After that, I try to give myself five minutes of quiet in the car before I start work: I put on a bit of classical music to get in the right frame of mind before cracking on with my workday.

## Impact on my job role

On occasion, with morning routines being so unpredictable, I've not been able to get my son to school on time, so have had to call into work late or my calls have had to be cleared for that morning.

Then there was one Sunday night my wife and I had to catch up on some paperwork to prepare for Monday. We had put our son to bed, but he was very restless, and we heard him moving around upstairs. The next morning, I had an hour break between clients and was quickly doing some online banking (I don't get this chance at home) when I noticed a considerable three figured sum had come out of my account. It transpired my son had gone on to my iPad and spent the money on toys, not really realising the monetary value of it. I rang work and they arranged cover for my next client while I got everything canceled, otherwise I would have lost hundreds of pounds.

My role requires some online training to be undertaken a few times per year. Often, I find myself taking this home, and I am completing this past midnight because my son demands my full attention until he's settled in bed. This, of course, impacts on my level of tiredness for the next day at work.

## My experience of being a 'male' carer in the workplace

Quite rightly, the prehistoric days where the mother is expected to stay at home while the father goes out to work are long gone. My wife has a relatively high-powered job, and with her being the main earner she has to concentrate on her job while I care for our son. Personally, I don't think of myself as a male carer, but it's quite evident that, for those in senior roles across many companies, our situation is not the normal one. There have been issues in the past, but I find it depends on the manager you speak to. It has been said to me by a previous manager that I get put on too much by my wife and that she should do more, and, on a daily basis, I have had to explain why, as a male, I have to do various tasks at home. The sector I work in is female dominated and being a male carer is quite an unusual thing in itself - but having a caring responsibility at home is even rarer.

## Supportive relationships

It can be difficult to maintain relationships when you have additional responsibilities. I have a professional counsellor but that's more to do with the adoption side of things.

I have one lifelong friend who has known my son since he was five and whose wife is in the caring profession, so he understands my situation. We offload to each other occasionally, but not on a weekly or daily basis. It's probably a male thing that we're not in touch every single day.

I had been a football coach with my eldest son years ago, so when our youngest son joined the under 5s team and they were short of a coach, I was basically volunteered by my wife. To be honest, this has been a godsend though, as it gives me adult time with fellow coaches: a very rare commodity I find nowhere else.

## What support have you found in the workplace?

There wasn't anyone at work I felt I could talk to about being a male working carer until I got a male manager recently who also comes from a caring background, so he has a lot of empathy. There's always a nervousness when a new manager starts because you don't know if they're going to take on board your caring responsibilities, so when a manager is open about their caring responsibilities in the workplace it makes all the difference.

Now that we have Carer Champions in my workplace, I've found that the culture has started to include working carers, and both champions check in with me regularly.

Working carers can be quite introverted and not want to say anything to anyone, but a colleague with caring responsibilities approached me through our new 'Working Carer Workplace Network' recently about football coaching, which was nice: I didn't even know she was a carer.

We also have a WhatsApp group where we can connect with other working carers to link each other up with helpful support and share our own experiences.

## How could your employer improve?

### Provide an opportunity for feedback separate from performance-related activities

Working carers can find that the structure of the performance reviews isn't very helpful.

We are asked at the end of the review how everything is at home, but we tend not to say too much about how things are going with our caring responsibilities in case it's used against us. It doesn't feel as if a performance review is the right place to be asked that question because it feels as if your answer to the question will be connected to how your performance is judged.

There isn't anywhere else we can give that feedback, so ideally that question should be asked in a separate meeting for those with caring responsibilities to provide an opportunity to be asked how our employer can best support us. I've heard that some larger organisations also conduct non-work performance-related staff welfare checks, conducted by a trained person.

### Awareness that different job roles mean different levels of peer support

Whereas members of the smaller office-based team always have more support from each other, the larger part of the workforce works out in the community but are in turn quite isolated from each other. This makes it more difficult to access support, and any daytime support groups aren't accessible for working carers.

## Consider specific needs around alternative care

Unless I book many, many, months in advance I struggle to book annual leave during school holidays when everyone else wants time off. My son can't be booked into standardised daycare or sports clubs, so it's very stressful trying to juggle arrangements if I can't get the time off. Specific private clubs that accommodate our child's needs often need more staffing, resulting in these facilities charging far more than standard mainstream holiday clubs... sometimes far more than what I'm actually earning that day.

## Have you had a carers assessment?

My son is having a care needs assessment from his school because we had an issue with him running off, but my wife has been told that his needs aren't severe enough for us to qualify for a carer break.

## If you're a working carer who recognises some of the experiences in the story above then contact us today!

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For more information or for an informal chat call Jessica on: 01452 933503 or email: [workingcarers@crossroadscareglos.org.uk](mailto:workingcarers@crossroadscareglos.org.uk)

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