



Why caring for younger siblings can be a lonely path

[Miki Perkins](#) The Age

8 September 2018 — 12:01am

At first meeting, these two young women seem like any pair of sisters. They're affectionate, they tease each other and finish each other's sentences. And there's a resemblance when they smile.

But in their modest North Melbourne apartment this extraordinary pair have embarked on a path most people will never have to contemplate.



Laura Box (on right) and her sister Natalie Box. Laura has looked after her sister after their parents died.

Laura Box, 31, Natalie Box, 14, and their five siblings were raised in a public housing unit in Carlton by parents who never had a formal education and sometimes struggled to care for a large family.

But they loved their children, the sisters say, and always encouraged them to go to school. Sadly, their dad died eight years ago and their mother two years ago.

Of the siblings, Laura has been the only one to finish high school and go to university, and is now a nurse in paediatric intensive care at the Royal Children's Hospital.

When their mother died, Laura knew she wanted to raise her youngest sibling Natalie, then aged 12, and she became a young kinship carer.

"Natalie's bright and easy to direct," says the 31-year-old. "I sometimes struggle but my partner Matt [Doidge] helps out too and work have been really great and flexible."

There are about 8000 children in Victoria who can't live with their parents for a variety of reasons, including economic disadvantage and family violence.

Kinship carers - relatives or friends who become carers - form the backbone of the out-of-home care system, and there are about 4000 kinship households in Victoria. It's often assumed they are grandparents and older relatives, and little is known about the lives of young kinship carers like Laura.

Melbourne University researcher Meredith Kiraly is undertaking some of the only Australian research on young kinship carers, and has done in-depth interviews with about 37 young carers across Australia.

Typically, becoming a kinship carer at a young age means their education and employment are profoundly affected, Dr Kiraly has found. They often live in poverty and overcrowded housing.

One of the most concerning findings has been how isolated young carers feel, says Dr Kiraly. There is no dedicated support service in Australia they can contact for help.

"It's a very disparate group, often young carers don't know anyone in their situation," Dr Kiraly says. "Carer support groups are mainly grandparents. A young person takes one look and never comes back."

When Laura agreed to take on the care of Natalie, social workers from the Department of Health and Human Services were relieved. But she says they did not help her formalise the arrangement.

"They didn't even do a check to make sure I was a normal, capable human being," Laura says.

Laura had to apply to the Family Court herself for official guardianship of her sister, which she found frustrating. And she has never had a kinship carer allowance.

To begin with Natalie, now 14, did not want to move in. "I was pretty horrible at the start," she says with a laugh. But over almost three years she has adjusted, made new friends, loves English and does 10 extracurricular dance classes a week (yes, 10).

Dr Kiraly is looking at establishing a pilot support service for young kinship carers.

A spokeswoman for the department said it was unable to comment on individual cases.

They said supports were available to carers where child protection investigates and substantiates concerns that requires the child to be placed in care.