

JANE BARRY

PARENTING

**Q** My kids are fascinated by those petting zoos in the shopping centres and I always say they can't go near them. But I really don't want to put my own phobias about germs onto the kids. What are the risks? Am I right to be careful?

**A** Yes and no. This is one of those parenting situations when you need to balance potential risk with overall benefit. Kids who constantly feel left out and don't get to share the same experiences as their peers can end up very resentful. Petting zoos are regulated by each state/territory government health authority which generally cite a very low, but still possible, risk of acquiring an infection from the animals. Zoonotic diseases are those which are passed from animals to humans, with some animals presenting a higher risk than others. Zoos and farms need to adhere to stringent guidelines regarding the display of only healthy animals, disposing of animal waste quickly, supplying adequate hand washing facilities as well as vaccinating and screening all animals on display. Most of them are very aware of how they need to function in order to not compromise either the public health or their livelihood. Sensible hygiene precautions are necessary, such as not letting kids eat while they're near the animals, not touching their nose or face after patting them, avoiding any contact with animal faeces or urine and washing and drying hands well when the up-close-and-personal contact is over. It's also important for any open wounds to be covered and the kids supervised throughout their contact to ensure they handle the animals carefully.

**Q** I know that tummy time is important for our baby, but he hates it and only lasts for a few minutes before I have to pick him up. He's almost two months old and he's not rolling yet. What can we do so he learns to like it?

**A** Some babies just don't tolerate lying on their tummies very well. But it's such an important factor in their overall development that it is worth persevering. With practice and repetition they build their upper body strength and learn what's involved in keeping their little head up. Since the recommendation is to always settle babies to sleep on their backs, there needs to be some daily opportunity to lie on their front when they are awake. Cover the basics first and make sure you're putting him down somewhere comfortable, where he can see you and isn't hungry, overstimulated or tired. You could try laying him on a table or on his change mat with you sitting in front or to his side. Some babies prefer being up higher than the floor so this makes a difference. If he struggles to hold his head up you could roll a towel into a crescent shape and position it underneath his chest. Place some bright toys around his field of vision so he's more likely to focus outwards and be distracted. Lie down on your back and position him on your front so he can see you up close. Other ways to build up his anti-gravity muscles and those in his neck would be to hold him so he's facing outwards rather than towards your chest. Playing "aeroplanes" with him will be useful too. This will help him to learn what's involved in arching his back and lifting his head. Rolling doesn't usually start until (about) three to four months. Generally babies roll from their front to their back first and then the other way.

■ Jane Barry is a registered nurse, midwife and child health nurse. The advice offered is intended to be general and not a substitute for professional, individual assessment and guidance. Email parentingqueries@yahoo.com.au

# Remember the carers

Hundreds of thousands of young Australians care for infirm family and friends every day, **Lucy Baker** writes

**B**efore you pack the children off to school, or take one more look in the mirror before taking yourself off to work, send a mental hug to 11,600 Canberra children who bathe, feed and carry a parent before joining the other youth at school today.

Out of the official 43,000 carers in the ACT, that's a staggering ratio – nationally, one in 10 young people are responsible for the day to day welfare of a family member or members, with 170,600 of them under the age of 18.

Across Australia, there are about 380,000 young carers. As a definition, carers are those angels who provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends who have a disability, mental illness, chronic condition, terminal illness or who are frail aged.

They can also help with medications and appointments, shopping and even paying the bills, as well as watching out to make sure the person they're caring for is feeling okay.

It's a lot to ask but children, as most adults say, are resilient. Many of these young carers will simply grow into adulthood, continuing in this role.

Almost 500,000 of this country's 2.6 million carers are primary carers – providing the most care, day in, day out – and most of them women.

The tug of war between one's own life with its opportunities of independence and that of caring for a loved one who is dependent is a difficult and costly one all carers face.

A 2007 Deakin University study found that carers had the lowest health and well-being out of any group. Given that they spend on average about 40 hours a week caring, this is hardly surprising news – while among those who take care of a loved one suffering from mental illness, this weekly toll goes up to about 104 hours per week.

Perhaps it is easier to have boundaries when you are an adult carer – not so easy as a child or teenager.

For those still in school, the sacrifices start early.

Lori-Jean is a 15-year-old Canberra school girl – the kind you might see loitering with mates in



Carer Lori-Jean Gray, 15, with her father Michael at their home in Gilmore. Photo: Andrew Sheargold

## Tips for carers

- Take care of you too!
- Make time to get out and about.
- Eat well and get regular exercise.
- Learn to relax and get enough sleep.
- Reward yourself every once in a while.
- Talk to someone who understands.
- Your local Carers Association has workers who are there to listen. Ph: 1800 242 636.

a shopping mall or giggling at the bus stop, with one exception. Her role as carer generally takes priority over her social life.

Her father is a paraplegic and amputee (following a car accident and a further accident that was not car-related), and for Lori-Jean, this is how life is and has been since she was a toddler.

However, she brushes off any sign of pity.

"Sometimes when people hear my story, they are sympathetic and say, 'Oh, wow' – but as my dad has been in need of care all my life, to me, it's just my life. This is in my life for a reason."

This way of life has given her extra tools now she is a teenager, Lori-Jean says.

"When I look around me, I notice that I am compassionate, and notice what others are going through. I always think that other people have it harder, and I like to think that I am someone people easily talk to about their problems."

Like Lori-Jean, many young carers are proud of who they are

and what they do. However, it's a tough way of life, with some of the most preciously guarded teenage "selfish" years being swamped by demands from others. Consequently it can affect how they feel, how much time they get to spend with friends, how they manage their schoolwork, or hold down a job.

This is where healthy, knowledgeable adults outside the family enter the picture.

Lori, like others, relies on some outside support options that include Carers ACT, respite options, St Vincent De Paul's and St Nick's Young Carers camp.

And there are also other, interstate ways for young carers to feel that they are not alone.

Lori, along with hundreds of other young people, recently attended the National Young Carers Action team meetings in Brisbane.

For Lori, the experience was grounding and affirmative.

"All the young carers there had nothing negative to say

about their situations," she said.

"Everyone was just taking things in their stride, as if the experiences were part of us and who we are."

With still a few years before leaving school, Lori has one eye on the possibility of being a teacher.

"Helping people would be good, something educational, that makes a difference."

Every week, in the ACT hundreds of Canberrans get injured in accidents, a careless action, a silly prank, a deliberate act, a drunk driver.

And next week, more young people will find themselves having to set aside selfish agendas and care for a loved one.

For them, Lori, with over a decade of experience under her belt, has some advice.

"It's going to be hard – but it's worth it, because in the end you will look at life in a whole different way and be stronger for it."