

Latchkey Children

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Throughout the school year, many children go home from school and spend a few hours alone, waiting for their parent(s) to return home from work. With summer approaching, parents must decide, "Is my child old enough to stay home alone *all day*?" Many low-income parents are able to pay for a few hours of child care, but the prospect of full-day costs are prohibitive.

Children who stay home alone, either for a few hours after school during the school year or for the summer months, are commonly referred to as "latchkey children." The phrase "latchkey" originates from the early 19th century, when children in a similar situation would wear the key to their home tied to a string they wore around their neck and were responsible for their own care (Southern Early Childhood Association, 1993). Self-care is often seen by parents as an opportunity for the child to build self-esteem, confidence, and competence.

In a recent study conducted in New York, parents of latchkey children were interviewed about their attitudes towards having their children, ranging in age from 8-10, in self-care during the after-school hours. Most felt the children were able to care for themselves, but they felt guilty over the arrangement and expressed dissatisfaction over the local school-based after-school program. Most parents did not allow their children to play outside and reported allowing the children to spend their time watching television (Boland & Simmonds, 1996).

Community Support for Latchkey Children

In some communities, the public library becomes the place latchkey children spend their unsupervised hours. A 1988 survey about latchkey children in the library indicated that as many as 76% of libraries are

used by latchkey children during the school week. While many librarians feel it is necessary and important for the public library to serve this population, problems occur due to unsupervised behavior, children not being picked up at closing time, disruptive behavior, and inappropriate use of the library. Librarians are divided on the issue of coping with latchkey children. Some feel it is not the library's responsibility to provide this service, while others feel it is an excellent opportunity to reach a population that may not otherwise develop skills to use the library effectively (Tinnish, 1995).

Many communities establish hotline numbers for latchkey children to use when they feel the need to hear an adult voice. In Chicago, latchkey children can call "Grandma Please!" and talk with an adult volunteer, typically a senior citizen, who has been through a specially designed training program. The "Grandma Please" service provides latchkey children with the opportunity to engage in conversation and gain comfort from the volunteer.

Other services have been established for parents whose work schedules do not allow them easy access to a telephone to call home periodically to check on the child. For example, the KidCalls Telephone Monitoring service is an automated calling system. Parents leave a recorded message with the service, which automatically dials the home at the appointed time. If everything is ok, the child presses "1"; if the child needs help, the child presses "2." If the child presses 2 or there is no answer, the service begins calling a network of individuals living nearby with whom the parent has made prior arrangements to be contacted in such cases.

Parents with children in latchkey situations are usually careful to provide them with ground rules to follow during the hours they are home alone. The

National Safety Institute (“Home Alone,” n.d.) offers the following basic guidelines:

- Make sure doors and windows are locked while the child is home alone.
- Post emergency telephone numbers next to the telephones.
- Post telephone numbers of trusted neighbors or friends near the telephone.
- Require the child to check in with a neighbor or parent indicating they have arrived home safely.
- Make sure the child does not open the door to anyone that he or she doesn’t know well or is unsure of.
- Tell the child not to let unfamiliar callers know he or she is home alone.
- Leave an extra key with a trusted neighbor (for the occasion when the child loses the key).
- Parents and children should also be sure they practice emergency procedures, such as how to leave the home if a fire breaks out, what to do in case of threatening weather, or other disaster situations such as earthquakes.

Other Options

It is often the case that a community is not aware of the need to provide care for school-aged children in a given neighborhood. Parents may wish to hold organizational meetings and plan for ways to meet their needs for child care. Various agencies and institutions are available to assist parents in accessing school-age child care or to help them establish school-age child care programs. Parents can contact:

- their local county Cooperative Extension Service Office;
- the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA), an organization composed of individuals and groups who are new to the field of school-age child care;

- the School-Age Child Care Project at Wellesley College Center for Research on Women [EDITORIAL NOTE 3/25/98: The School-Age Child Care Project has changed its name to the National Institute on Out-of-School Time]

For Further Information

“Grandma, Please!”
4520 N. Beacon St.
Chicago, IL 60640
Telephone: 773-561-3500
URL: <http://www.terasys.com/hullhouse/grandma.html>

National School-Age Care Alliance
4720 N. Park
Indianapolis, IN 46205
Telephone: 317-283-3817

School-Age Child Care Project
Wellesley College Center for Research on Women
Wellesley, MA 02181
Telephone: 617-283-2547
URL: <http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/CRW/SAC/>

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Sources

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