



The Middle Years: After-School Care and Monitoring

An estimated 5 million children are home alone before or after school. Some children successfully care for themselves after school for an hour or two. But statistics show that children who begin caring for themselves after school (called self-care) at a young age are much more likely to get involved in risky behavior than children not in self-care. The after-school hours from 3–7pm are when violent juvenile crime peaks. This is also the time when youth are most likely to experiment with alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and sex.

Some parents may be unsure how much after-school freedom is OK for older children and youth. High-quality after-school programs provide peace of mind for some parents and children and have important benefits, including friendships, better grades, and better behavior during school hours. Despite the fun and benefits, some children resist programs that look too much like child care or activities that look too “supervised.”

Programs can be as simple as unstructured “drop-in” times provided by a neighbor or a community center. Other after-school programs may be school-based and have a structured curriculum. Some neighborhoods offer an integrated learning program that includes resources from the school or that combines community resources from local businesses with those from faith-based organizations. Integrated programs often include tutoring, mentoring, life-skills training, and service projects.

Recent research shows that the healthy development of children ages 6–12 requires a lot of adult supervision and parental monitoring. As parents, you play an important role in providing for your child’s enriching after-school activities by:

- *Monitoring your child’s after-school hours.* Monitoring means that parents know where their children are, who their friends are, what they are doing, when they are going out, and when they are coming back.
- *Supporting efforts to increase after-school programs in your community.* Parents can work with local schools, community recreation departments, businesses, and faith-based communities to develop new programs or enhance existing ones.
- *Adequately prepare your children for self-care.* If parents have no other option but to leave their child alone after school, the child will need the parents’ help to plan ways to handle the responsibility, including what to do in case of emergencies.

You can contact your local child care resource and referral agency (CCR&R), local public library, school district office, recreation center, or cooperative extension office to find more information about after-school programs in your area.

The information contained in this summary is taken from the Middle Years chapter of the Violence Prevention Resource Guide for Parents by Peggy Patten and Anne S. Robertson (Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2001).

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