

Children At Home Alone: A Parent's Guide

HE-606, Reprinted October 1994. Recommended for Extension use by Ellen Abell, *Extension Family And Child Development Specialist*. Originally prepared by Stephen F. Duncan, former *Extension Family And Human Life Development Specialist*.

Latchkey children are those who spend time alone or with a younger child on a regular basis, usually before or after school. Many parents are finding it necessary to allow their school-age children to spend part of the day at home alone.

Recently, the US. Census Bureau estimated that approximately two million children between the ages of seven and thirteen cared for themselves during afterschool hours. Some estimates indicate there are even more.

The number of children who care for themselves is expected to increase as more and more mothers enter the work force and as single-parent families increase.

This publication is designed to help such parents to make effective decisions about self-care and to prepare your children to be confident and competent in caring for themselves.

Sections

I. What Are The Possible Risks And Benefits Of Self-Care?

II. How Can I Tell If My Child Is Ready For Self-Care?

III. Preparing Children For Self-Care

IV. Crisis And Emergency Situations

V. Developing Rules For Self-Care

VI. Before-School Self Care

VII. Community Support For School-Age Children

I. What Are The Possible Risks And Benefits Of Self-Care?

Possible Risks

Some experts claim that the degree of risk for selfcare depends on the age and residence of the child, the amount of time spent alone during the day, and the degree of supervision. For example, children nine and younger who live in larger cities and spend four or more hours without supervision after each school day are at high risk for harm. Children twelve and older who live outside large cities, who are home alone less than two hours each school day, and who can telephone parents or see another adult are at fairly low risk for harm.

Other experts on child health claim that children without adult supervision will more likely (1) feel lonely, scared, rejected, and be emotionally scarred, (2) become delinquent, (3) do poorly in school, and (4) suffer harm through accidents or sexual abuse. Some selfcare children living in large cities show greater fear, lower IQ, lower self-esteem, and less ability to get along with others than supervised children do.

Some ten to twelve year olds try to act mature to lead their parents to think that they are ready for selfcare. They may say they are ready to stay alone because they believe that this is what you want to hear. They may feel responsible for helping their parents feel better about leaving them on their own.

Other risks involve the bad feeling parents may have about leaving their children alone. They may be anxious and worried about their children's safety while alone, their use of time, or the bad influence of other children. Parents may also experience the three o'clock syndrome at work. Supervisors see people working slower and having more accidents on the assembly-line when their children are at home alone after school.

Possible Benefits

Studies of children who live in suburban and rural areas show no differences between supervised and unsupervised children as far as being afraid, tense, and upset, failing grades, or being delinquent. In fact, some researchers have argued that a self-care arrangement gives children the opportunity to develop independence and responsibility for themselves and, sometimes, for a younger child as well.

A recent study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that positive aspects of the self-care situation were reported by 90 percent of the adults questioned. Among the advantages mentioned were the child's new independence and growth in useful home and safety skills. In other surveys, children have reported that they liked self-care, especially the freedom to do as they like and feeling like an adult.

Children who fare well in self-care generally have parents who are concerned about their needs, who discipline by reasoning with their children, and who expect a lot from them.

II. How Can I Tell If My Child Is Ready For Self-Care?

There is no magic formula by which you can tell whether your child is ready to be at home alone. You have to consider the child, the family, and the community to decide the timing and extent of self-care.

The following Parent's Checklist for Selfware can help you assess your child's readiness, your family's readiness, and your community's suitability for a self-care arrangement for your child.

The checklist may also point out areas where your child is not mature enough to stay alone. You may need to think about other kinds of child-care if your answer to any of these questions is *no*.

Parent's Checklist For Self-Care

Assessing Child Readiness

PHYSICAL

1. Does your child have enough physical control to keep from injuring himself or herself around the house?
2. Is your child able to handle keys and unlock doors so that he or she will not be locked in or out?

3. Is your child able to operate safely any gas or electric appliance that he or she might use while alone, such as a heater, stove, blender, or vacuum cleaner?

EMOTIONAL

1. Is your child able to tolerate being away from you or other adults and to stay in the house alone without being lonely or afraid?

2. Does your child act normal, free of withdrawn, hostile, or self-destructive behavior?

3. Is your child able to handle usual as well as unexpected situations without getting upset?

4. Is your child able to follow important rules without always trying to see what he or she can get by with?

5. Does your child agree that he or she is ready to stay home alone?

INTELLECTUAL

1. Is your child able to understand and remember instructions, whether written down or told to him or her?

2. Is your child able to work out the solution to basic problems of caring for himself or herself?

3. Is your child able to read and write well enough to take telephone and other messages?

4. Is your child usually able to find something to do when alone, without getting into trouble?

SOCIAL

1. Is your child able to ask for help from friends, neighbors, and police when needed?

2. Does your child understand the role of police, firefighters, and rescue squads?

3. Is your child willing and able to call in the police when needed?

4. Is your child able to get along with another child in the family, neighborhood children, and adults?

Assessing Family Readiness

1. Are you as a parent able to stay in touch with and supervise your child, even though you are not at home?

2. Will you be available for emergencies? Is there a friend or relative who will be available in case you cannot be reached?

3. Is your family life stable enough that your child feels secure?

4. Are you able to teach your child how to take care of things when he or she is alone at home?

Assessing Community Suitability

1. Is your community reasonably safe, and does each family member think it is safe?

2. Does your community have other kinds of day-care so that your family can make a change if self-care does not work out?

III. Preparing Children For Self-Care

Trial Runs

If you are considering leaving your child alone on a regular basis, you may want to have a few trial runs first. One way to do this is to leave the child alone for a little while. Go shopping or visit a neighbor for a short time. Afterwards, talk with your child about staying alone, listening carefully to see if he or she was afraid or lonely. How did you feel while you were away from your child?

If this separation works well for both of you, try again. Increase the amount of time you are away and leave some specific directions for your child to follow. After each trial run, sit down and talk with your child about the experience and how he or she felt about it. Again, your feelings about the experience are also very important.

If your child is afraid to be alone in the house or unable to follow directions, he or she may not be ready to be left alone. Or, if you feel very anxious, you may want to consider other child-care options.

Safety Skills

Personal safety skills will help children protect themselves and also help keep them from being afraid. Children should be taught these skills gradually and given time to act out emergency situations. The more practice they get, the more likely they will remember what to do and how to be safe in a real emergency.

The Telephone. The telephone is a life line between you and your child. If your work situation permits, have your child call when he or she arrives home from school. A call from you once or twice a day can make your child feel more secure. Post a list of emergency numbers by the phone and teach your child how to use them and what to say. Practice making these calls.

The phone can also provide a child with companionship. Some children will hold long conversations daily with friends who are also alone. If it bothers you when you cannot reach your child, set some telephone rules. Put a limit on the time of each call; for example, 10 minutes maximum with at least 15 minutes between calls. A kitchen timer near the phone can time calls. Or, make a rule that the phone must be clear for 5 minutes beginning every quarter hour or at other specified times. This enables you to contact your child during those times.

A major concern of parents with children at home alone is to keep outsiders from knowing that no adult is at home. In some families children are told not to answer the phone at all unless it rings your special code. An example of a code is when you call, let the phone ring two times, and then hang up and call again. The child knows that he or she can answer.

If you want your child to answer all calls, have him or her practice these telephone safety rules:

- Answer the phone pleasantly. *Do not give your name.*
- Never tell a caller that you are at home alone. Say that your parent cannot come to the phone right now. Write down the name and phone number of the caller and say your parent will call back.
- Do not give anyone your parent's phone number at work. If the caller says the message is very important and cannot wait, write down the number and call your parent at work.
- If the same person calls more than once and you do not know the person, call your parent or a contact person.
- If someone makes a prank call -- teases, scares you, threatens you, or tries to play a trick on you -- hang up immediately and call your parent. Don't answer the phone or door until your parent or a contact person gets home.

The Door. In some families, the rule is not to answer the door at all. If you want your child to answer the door, have him or her practice these door safety rules:

- *Be sure the door is always locked.*

- Look through the window or peephole to see who is knocking or ringing the bell.
- Talk through the door to find out who it is and what he or she wants. *Do not open the door.*
- Never let anyone in unless you have been told to expect him or her, even if it is someone you know. Do not allow anyone in to use the bathroom or telephone. Say "no, I am sorry." Never be embarrassed when you don't let people in.
- If the person at the door has come to deliver a package or make a repair and you were not told to expect it, *do not let him or her in.* If you are expecting a delivery or repair person, have him or her slip an ID card under the door.
- If you know the person or if the person says your parents asked him or her to stop by, call your parents and check.
- If someone continues knocking, call a neighbor or the police for help.

If the above directions don't fit your family situation, create some that do. Write them out for your child to follow. Practice safety rules by acting out what to do in different situations.

Appliances. Problems with misusing appliances can be avoided if you talk about which appliances your child may use or may not use. It might be helpful to have do-not-touch stickers on each appliance that your child should not use. A list posted on the refrigerator door may also remind the child. You may not want your child to use the iron, the food processor, power tools, and the stove.

Be sure your child knows how to use correctly any appliances that he or she is permitted to use.

IV. Crisis And Emergency Situations

A small crisis is a tense and upsetting situation; an emergency calls for immediate action. You should help your child to know which is a real emergency and what to do.

Examples Of Small Crises

Locked out. Children are not the only people who lock themselves out of the house. But children can get upset when it happens. Plan for it with your children. Arrange to leave a key with a contact person if one lives close by and is usually at home. Or, hide a key in a special place that no one else knows about. Also, be sure your child always has a quarter to call you from a pay phone.

Blackout. Planning ahead for a blackout involves keeping a flashlight or two in a handy place to be used in emergencies only -- never for play. Show your child the circuit breaker box or fuse box and how to reset the circuit or replace a fuse.

Discuss in advance what to do if the blackout is caused by a local area power failure. The first plan may be for your child to call you or a contact person. You may want to place a list of things your child can do during a blackout near the flashlight. Provide a few items that can run on batteries, such as a radio, clock, or electronic games. Also include a list of where additional flashlights, battery-powered lamps, and batteries may be found.

Plumbing. Show your child how to close the shut-off valve for each sink and toilet if a pipe should leak. If a pipe bursts, be sure the child knows whom to call for help (contact person, parent).

Broken Glass. If your child drops a plate or glass and it shatters, tell him or her to check first for any cuts and take care of them. Then be sure to wear shoes to clean up the glass. Show your child how to sweep broken glass into a dustpan. Instruct him or her not to pick up slivers by hand. You may want to show your child how to cover the area with a cloth or newspaper to mark it off limits to everyone until you get home. To help prevent broken glass crises, provide unbreakable glasses and plates for your child to use while at home alone.

Examples Of Emergency Situations

Home Fires. Children at home alone should be taught fire safety, fire prevention, and ways to get out of a smoke-filled house.

- Show your child where the smoke detectors are and let them hear what one sounds like.
- Prepare a diagram of your house with escape routes from each room drawn in.
- Practice fire drills.
- Practice leaving a smoky room by crawling on hands and knees to the nearest door that goes outside.
- Practice what to do if your clothes catch on fire. Stop, drop, and roll. Drop to the ground or floor and roll until the fire is out.

It is essential for your child to understand that the most important thing for them to do is to *get out of the house*. He or she should not try to put out a small fire or go back into the house to get anything. He or she can call the fire department from a neighbor's house.

Severe Weather/Tornadoes. Prepare a severe weather kit with your child; keep it with the flashlight. Some items for the kit might be:

- A portable radio with weather band.
- Flashlight, extra batteries.
- Two days' supply of food that needs no cooking or refrigeration.
- Clean plastic container for water.
- Small first aid kit.
- Reminder of the place to go if there is a tornado warning.

Teach your child how to use the radio and television severe weather announcements. A watch means to be on the alert for more information. A warning means a tornado or severe storm has been sighted nearby, and the child should go to a safe place. The safest places in a home are in a small hall, closet, or bathroom near the center of the house or in a basement. Warn the child to stay away from windows and glass doors.

First Aid

Children on their own should be taught some basic first aid. They also need to know how to recognize what is an emergency (get help) and what injuries can be handled at home.

Assemble a simple first aid kit with your child, explaining what each item is and how it should be used. Keep it with the flashlight and batteries. The following are some suggested contents; replace any thing that is used up:

- A box of bandages of different sizes for small cuts and scrapes.

- A sterile gauze pad for larger cuts.
- Adhesive tape to hold sterile pads.
- Small scissors to cut tape.
- Tweezers to remove bee stings or slivers.
- Calamine lotion to treat insect bites.
- Peroxide to clean cuts.
- Cotton balls to use with peroxide to clean cuts.
- Digital thermometer to check for fever (glass thermometers should be kept out of reach because of the mercury).
- Ice bag to be filled from the freezer.

Cuts And Scrapes. These are an everyday occurrence for many children. Teach your child how to wash out small cuts or scrapes with soap and water and how to place a bandage, if needed.

If a cut is bleeding profusely, tell the child to apply direct pressure until bleeding stops, then clean and bandage it. If blood is gushing and squirting and can not be stopped, *this is an emergency*. Have your child call you immediately. If you cannot be reached, your child should call the emergency medical service number or police.

Burns. The best treatment for minor burns is to run cold water on the burn or hold an ice cube on it until it no longer hurts. A cold pack in the freezer can be very helpful.

Nosebleeds. Nosebleeds can be very frightening to a child at home alone, so it is important to teach children what to do.

- Sit up; do not lie down.
- Pinch the nose between finger and thumb and apply pressure for about 5 minutes.
- If the bleeding does not stop, apply a cold cloth on the nose. If that does not work, call for help.

Poisoning. The best treatment is prevention.

- Place poisonous substances out of the reach of children.
- Mark all poisonous substances clearly and explain symbols used to the children.
- Keep the number of the poison control center on an emergency phone list near the phone.

The Alabama Poison Control number is: 1-800-462-0800 or 1-800-292-6678

V. Developing Rules For Self-Care

Rules play an important role for children at home alone because they help point out problems and tell your child what to do. Rules define boundaries for safety and help your children feel secure. Rules show what you expect your child's behavior to be. Children who understand the reasons for the rules and help to make the rules are more likely to follow the rules.

Guidelines for Establishing Effective Rules

- Allow your child to help make the rules.

- State rules clearly and positively; be specific. Say, for example, "The breakfast dishes should be done and the table set for dinner by 5:00 p.m."
- If the rule involves a task, make it a necessary one and one that is appropriate for your child. It may be unreasonable for a nine-year-old to prepare dinner but appropriate for him or her to set the table.
- Build in an enforceable consequence with the rule. Say, "After your math homework is done, you may watch television for half an hour." When parents are not present to enforce the rules, enforcement should begin shortly after parents arrive home. Remember to check and enforce rules consistently.
- Remember that mistakes can happen. Firmness, patience, and flexibility will help you and your child.

Some areas where rules might help include: homework, chores, play privileges, care for a younger child, and snack preparation.

Homework. Some families reserve homework for the evening when parents are home and can help children with assignments. Other families expect children to do homework after school when they are at home alone. Keeping track of assignments completed and agreeing on a specified time period -- for example, 4:30 to 5:15 -- may help children stay with the task. Setting aside a special few minutes daily for parents and children to go over completed assignments together is helpful to everyone.

Chores. You may wish to have your child do some chores before or after school. There are many ways to divide chores among family members and your family may have a system that works well. If not, you may want to look at some other systems to find one that works for you. For instance, you may assign chores on a weekly or monthly basis, rotating them among family members. Family members may choose chores, either by personal preference or out of a job jar. In any case, stating the rules for chores clearly and providing rewards and consequences is important; for example, "your bedroom must be cleaned by 5 p.m. before you can work on your model airplane."

Play Privileges And Activities. You may require your child to stay in the house until you get home and not allow any friends in while you are away. Or, you may allow your child to play outside under certain conditions; for example, only if chores and homework are done, only if your child lets you know, only with certain friends. This should be discussed as a family and clear rules should be made. In either case, it is very necessary that you or some responsible adult knows where your child is playing and who he or she is with. This may be done by phone or arrangements made with a neighbor or friend.

Some families may want to discuss the use of the television -- who chooses, what is permissible, and other concerns.

Children on their own often have time that can be lonely or boring. But the time left after chores and homework are done can be productive for children as they learn to enjoy leisure time.

You can help your child recognize that boredom is usually his or her choice, not someone else's problem to solve. He or she can choose not to be bored and decide what to do. Parents can help a child recognize and organize the possibilities: things to do outside; things to do inside; things to do alone; things to do with people.

Be clear about activities with other people, such as who, where, and the times to leave and return. Consider the possibility of phone pals -- a friend to check homework with and talk to. Help children

develop some interests that can continue over time, like collections and genealogy, or club work, such as 4-H or Scouts.

Caring For A Younger Child

When more than one child is at home, the situation changes. Usually the older child is responsible for the care of the younger. Some families consider this responsibility a regular part of the child's home activities. Other families arrange to pay the older child.

Brothers and sisters provide company for each other and having even a younger person in the house may reduce a child's fears. On the other hand, there is the potential for arguing and fighting. This is the concern most often expressed by both parents and children.

Some serious problems with two or more children may be prevented by your being aware of them. Fighting can cause serious accidents and injuries. In some families, bullying and sexual abuse can occur. If you do not make plans for who is responsible for what, you may get a lot of unwelcome phone calls in the work place. Again, by anticipating problems and establishing rules, you can help reduce conflicts. Limiting the number of decisions the child in charge makes can help everyone. Planning in advance what snack, chores, homework, and play activities children are to do after school will help avoid conflicts.

You can help your older child understand that his or her responsibilities to the younger child are not only as the boss, but also as a caring nurturer, an official child-care person. The child in charge monitors behavior, enforces the rules, and reports problems to parents when necessary.

When an older child is in charge of a younger one, both children should be prepared. A child who is given responsibility for care of a younger child should receive instructions in caring for younger children. You need to establish with the older child what he or she may or may not do and how to be loving, understanding, and helpful to the younger child. Likewise, the younger child should be prepared for being cared for by the older child. No one has to be in charge when two children are close in age and can act independently. Each can be responsible for himself or herself.

Snack Preparation. Planning after-school snacks to fit into the day's plan for meals will help to ensure that the children are eating nutritious food. An evening planning session can also involve the child in preparing vegetables, nutritious dips, fresh or dried fruits, and milk drinks so that planned snacks are easily accessible. Also, children learn to use kitchen utensils and appliances by participating.

Children have high energy needs because their bodies grow rapidly. But besides extra calories, snacks can also provide children with vitamins, minerals, and protein that may not be completely furnished in regular meals.

For children who do not get enough vitamin A, vitamin C, and iron in their diets, choose snacks that supply these important nutrients. Foods high in iron include apricots, cherries, dried fruits, grapes, peanut butter, and enriched or whole-grain breads and cereals. High vitamin A foods include carrots, apricots, cantaloupe, fresh peaches, purple plums, and prunes. Cantaloupe, grapefruit, oranges, raspberries, strawberries, and citrus juices are high in vitamin C.

VI. Before-School Self Care

You may have to leave home before your child is awake. There may even be times when your child is up for quite a while after you leave and before he or she goes to school. You should be aware of some of the risks of leaving your child alone in the morning. One risk is that the child may miss the bus or ride and not go to school at all.

There is a higher rate of school absenteeism among children left on their own in the morning than with other children. One problem is transportation. If a child misses the bus, he or she generally has no other way to get to school. Some of the reasons that children give for missing the bus are that they overslept, they could not find homework, or they lost track of time. Another problem is that even if the child can get to school by bike or public transportation, he or she may not want to deal with tardy slips from the principal's office. Some schools do not admit late students without a note from parents. Being aware of some of these risks can help families plan.

The following suggestions may help you and your child get off to a good day:

- Make sure your child wakes up on time. Prepare breakfast before you leave and lunch, too, if needed.
- If you must leave for work before your child gets up, be sure to arrange for the child to wake up on time -- setting the alarm clock or a phone call from work helps.
- Children are more likely to eat breakfast if the table is set and breakfast is at least partially prepared. For example, cereal can be in the bowl with juice and milk in the refrigerator.
- Preparing for school the night before can make life much easier! You and your child can select clothing, pack the book bag, prepare lunch if needed, and arrange things in designated places to avoid panic in the morning.
- Preparing a list on a chalkboard or a special bulletin board in the kitchen or on the refrigerator door can help children remember what needs to be done.

VII. Community Support For School-Age Children

Until recently, latchkey children and the needs of families with all adults working were problems for individual families. Increasingly, however, community leaders, legislators, professionals, and families are defining self-care as a public issue. As a result, a variety of public and private programs have begun to address the needs of self-care children and their families.

Community Phone Centers

Community phone centers provide a service that children can call to check in when they get home from school and to ask questions if they need help. One example is Phone Friend, an approach used in a Pennsylvania community. This listening service has been very helpful to school-age children. The child calls a hotline number, and Phone Friend refers the child to any needed community services but does not usually give counseling or follow up on a caller except in an emergency. Phone Friend uses trained volunteers who listen to children who might be scared, bored, or lonely.

Local Crisis Centers in Alabama have a Kid's Line that serves a similar purpose. Grandma, Please! is another example of a telephone helpline that links self care children with older adults. This service helps eliminate the isolation of both the young and old in our communities.

Child Care For School-Agers

Increasingly, before- and after-school programs are being offered for school-age children. Some child care centers that provide service during the day for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers also offer school-age programs before or after school. Some before- or after-school programs are held in schools. These programs may be run by the school district or by a child care center. These programs often involve the parents and are relatively inexpensive. In addition, many communities have a variety of after-school activities available to children, such as Boy's Clubs, Girls' Clubs, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Camp Fire, 4-H, and the parks and recreation programs.

The availability, cost, and location of these before and after-school programs varies from one community to another. But experts have suggested important guidelines to use in choosing a program for school age children.

The program should have the following characteristics:

- Supervision by caring people trained in early childhood education, child development, or recreation. They should also have training in first aid and CPR.
- A wide variety of choices for children, good books, sports, expeditions, clubs, and many home activities like cooking and woodworking.
- Nutritious snacks.
- Private areas where children can study and do homework if they choose.
- Safe play areas and clean toilets and snack areas.
- Parent involvement and participation.
- State and local licenses.
- Activities appropriate to the age of the child.
- A staff-child ratio of one teacher for every fifteen children.
- A clearly defined purpose.
- Responsive to the local community.
- A balance of activities during the day to include formal and informal times, teacher-directed and child initiated experiences, and a wide range of activities.
- Positive interaction for a child with peers and adults.
- Opportunities for self-exploration, flexibility, and spontaneity.
- Agreed upon and clearly communicated consistent expectations and limits for children.

School-age Children As Community Resources

Some school-age children and families who are interested and feel their children are ready could serve as useful resources within communities. Establishment of a volunteer program for some of these children might have them serving as aides in child care facilities, libraries, parks, or museums. Providing this type of experience for interested children would give them valuable work experience and could fit as part of a package of child care arrangements that families put together.

Resources

For more information, contact any Alabama Cooperative Extension Office. The Extension Home Economist and 4-H and Youth Leader can provide you with information about:

- Programs for self-care children.
- Parent education and support programs.
- 4-H programs.
- Other agencies and resources available in your community.

For Further Reading:

Coolsen, P., M. Seligson, and J. Garbarino. 1985. When school's out and nobody's home. National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, 332 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 950, Chicago, IL 60604-4357.

Kyte, K. S. 1983. In charge: a complete handbook for kids with working parents. Knopf, New York.

Robinson, B. E., B. H. Roland, and M. Coleman. 1986. Latchkey kids: unlocking doors for children and their families. Lexington Books, Lexington, Mass.

Swan, H., and V. Huston. 1985. Alone at home: Self care for children of working parents. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

References

Cole, C., and H. Rodman. 1987. When school-age children care for themselves: issues for family life educators and parents. *Family Relations* 36, 92-96.

Labenson, D. 1986. A guide for parents with school agers who are home alone. Iowa State University Cooperative Extension Service.

Robinson, B. E., B. H. Roland, and M. Coleman. 1986. Latchkey kids: unlocking doors for children and their families. Lexington Books, Lexington, Mass.

Rodman, H., and C. Cole. 1987. Latchkey children: a review of policy and resources. *Family Relations* 36, 101-105.

Steinberg, L. 1986. Latchkey children and susceptibility to peer pressure: an ecological analysis. *Developmental Psychology* 22, 433-439.

Targ, D., S. F. Duncan, and M. Wagoner. 1985. Latch key kids: a growing concern. Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.