

LATCHKEY CHILDREN

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- The majority of children in this country are now growing up in families in which both parents or the only parent works outside of the home
- It has become commonplace in our society for children to take care of themselves for periods of time each day – just how common this phenomenon is is a matter of dispute
- Current census data suggests that only 7.8% of children between the ages of 5 and 13 – about 2 million – spend time in self-care, many experts estimate that over a quarter of the children who are between 6 and 14 years old spend time caring for themselves, most of them regularly

Research Findings:

- ✓ Galambos and Garbarino (2001) found no differences in academic achievement or school adjustment between small town 5th and 7th graders in self-care and their adult supervised peers
- ✓ Rodman, Pratto and Nelson (2001) found no differences in self-esteem, social skills, or sense of control over their own lives between 4th grade children in self-care and 4th graders supervised by parents
- ✓ Hedlin (2004) studied 1200 children in kindergarten through 8th grade and found that 80% of the children in self-care said they loved it or usually liked it
- ✓ Steinberg (2005) study of 5th, 6th, 8th, and 9th graders showed that the more removed from adult supervision adolescents are, the more they are susceptible to peer pressure to commit antisocial acts
- ✓ Long (2004) found that as children spend more time unattached in their homes, the incidence of experimentation with alcohol and sex increases

Parental Guidelines:

1. How old should a child be?

- Although it is generally agreed that a young child in primary school should not be left alone, age is not the only consideration
- Some children might function well at home alone, while others might not be ready to assume the responsibility of self-care
- Parents must make an informed decision based on their own child

- In order to be left alone, a child should want to assume the responsibility, should not be afraid to stay alone, should be able to follow directions, and should be able to solve problems independently
- Factors such as the amount of time the child will be alone, the accessibility of a parent or another adult in case of an emergency and how safe the neighborhood is, should be also taken into consideration

2. *How can a parent know if a child is ready to be left alone?*

- The simplest way is to ask the child if she/he wants to stay alone
- Most children will answer truthfully
- Signs of a child's fearfulness about being left alone include turning on all the lights, having the radio or television on full volume and suffering nightmares

3. *How long can a child be left alone?*

- The time should be kept at a minimum
- For older children, 3 hours per day is probably the absolute maximum
- Parents should come home as soon as they can and postpone errands until they can take the child with them

4. *Can a child be left with an older brother or sister?*

- Most child development experts agree that no child under 10 can effectively supervise other children
- It is recommended that when an older child is left in charge, all children in the family should be instructed about self-care and be made individually responsible rather than relying on the oldest child to carry responsibility for the others

5. *What should a parent do to make the latchkey experience work?*

- The experience should be a positive one, reinforcing the child's sense of independence and competence, and minimizing fear and anxiety
- Above all, it should be made clear that the parent is in charge, whether physically present or not
- A carefully considered set of rules and back-up systems should be developed and discussed with the child so that he/she is aware of what is expected by the parent

- The main issue for a parent in deciding if a child can function as a latchkey kid is whether he/she is capable of following agreed rules, completing homework, and accomplishing chores

Preparing Your Child:

- Assess your child's maturity level maturity means a child can do the right thing in terms of self-care and property
 - ✓ Can the child reason through the consequences of his/her actions?
- Teach your child basic safety precautions, including how to check in with parents or other adults, answer the phone and deal with emergencies
- Make a schedule and set limits
 - ✓ Setting limits should be a collaborative effort for both the parent and child
 - ✓ Be realistic in setting limits and expectations
- Encourage responsibility
 - ✓ This "free" time offers a good opportunity for your child to independently handle household chores or tasks
 - ✓ Set rewards for completion of tasks
 - ✓ The rewards teach kids that good deeds and hard work can reap benefits