

Latchkey Children

Today about one third of all school-age children, an estimated five million between ages 5 and 13, are so-called latchkey children – kids who care for themselves while parents are at work.

There is conflicting opinion about the effects of leaving children on their own. Some experts advise against leaving children under the age of 12 on their own. But some children under 12 may be all right on their own for several hours. The two biggest fears facing a young latchkey child are an encounter with an intruder and a parent who doesn't come home on time.

Every child is different, so the maturity and personality of your child should be an important consideration. You need to assess your child's needs and explore the various options available to you. If your child is not mature enough to stay along, try to arrange for some form of supervision.

SEEK ALTERNATIVES TO SELF CARE

Find out if there are school-age childcare programs or after-school activities for children. If there are no school-age child programs or activities available, see if your PTO, school, or place of worship can get such a program started or sponsor after-school activities.

See if grandparents or other relatives could take care of your child during the non-school hours. Hire a babysitter to come to your home or, to keep the costs down, try joining with other working parents to share the costs of paying a responsible stay-at-home mother or other responsible adult to watch the children after school.

If you can't locate good childcare, you may have to consider having your child stay at home alone for a short period of time each day. This choice should be made only with the understanding that parents whether physically present or not, are still in charge. This will create a positive experience for your child, help assure the child's safety and lessen your worry as a parent. To do this takes planning and good communication with your child.

Consider whether your children can usually be relied on to obey rules, finish homework, complete chores. Are they afraid of the dark and extremely afraid of unexplained noises? Have they developed the judgment necessary to turn off the TV and begin their homework or to say no when peers want to do something dangerous?

Make your family expectations and values known to your children. Explain that you expect them to abide by the house rules when they are by themselves.

It is important that children feel safe in their homes. Parents can reduce the fear of intruders by creating a "safe room" in the home. This can be done by installing a deadbolt lock on the door of a room and putting a phone inside. On a day to day basis keep a key outside in case someone gets locked in.

Check to make sure your children know the following:

- Their full name, address, and phone number.
- Your full name, the exact name of the place where you work and your work phone number.
- How to dial 9-1-1.
- How to carry a key so it is secure, but out of sight. Never have a name and address on the key.
- Never go into the house if a door is ajar or a window is broken.
- Lock the door on entering and keep doors and windows locked.
- What to do if they think they are being followed.
- Check in with you by telephone or report to a neighbor at a regularly scheduled time.
- Avoid walking or playing alone on the way home from school.
- How to answer the telephone without letting callers know they are home alone.
- What to do in case of fire.

TEACH RESPONSIBILITY

One of the most important tasks for parents is to teach responsibility and self-discipline to their children. Help your children develop judgment and self-confidence by playing “what if” games. Ask your children what they would do if:

- The power failed and the lights went out.
- Siblings didn’t arrive home on schedule or hurt themselves.
- A friend asked them to come over to see a new toy.
- An adult asked to come into the home when you are not there.
- A fire should break out.

All parents must take their responsibility to their children seriously and consider their children’s needs as they meet their work obligations. Whether physically present or not, parents must remain in charge.

For more safety information, check out www.morainefire.org