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Children in Self-care: The Latchkey Child

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When 12-year-old Jason comes home from school each day, he unlocks his front door and lets himself in. He fixes a snack, turns on the TV and sits down to watch. He will care for himself until his mother gets home at 5:45. Jason is a latchkey child.

Jessica, age 10, gets herself out of bed each morning at 7:00, gets dressed, fixes breakfast for herself and her sister, Sarah, age 8. She packs a lunch for each of them and gets them both off to the school bus stop by 8:00. Their mother and father leave for work at 6:00 a.m. Jessica and Sarah are also latchkey children.

Many parents, child care experts, community officials and others have become concerned about the number of children who are left alone without adult supervision before and after school each day. The term latchkey child has begun to imply that these youngsters are neglected by their parents. Is this true? Are they at risk of accident, injury or emotional and psychological problems? Or are they learning responsibility, independence and self-reliance — important characteristics of a mature and well-adjusted person? What should parents consider in their decision to leave children in self-care? Let's look more closely at what's involved.

How Many Self-Care Children Are There?

We are not sure how many children are in self-care each day, but it is safe to say that in this country there are several million. Virtually every community has families who have chosen a self-care arrangement for their children for a variety of reasons. It is not a new phenomenon, but because there are so many families today in which both parents work and so many more single parent families in which the parent must work, there are more self-care children than in the past. Some youngsters are alone for parts of every day, others only on occasion. Some begin self-care in early elementary school, others several years later. There are as many different kinds of arrangements as there are families.

What Do The Experts Say?

Some researchers have found that children left alone suffer more accidental injuries, experience greater fears and anxieties and are more vulnerable to sexual molestation and experimentation. Others have found that, in reality, there are relatively few of these problems and that the majority of self-care children are physically safe, emotionally content and do learn responsibility and self-reliance. A recent study (Rodman, Pratto and Nelson, 1985), however, showed no significant differences between a group of children in self-care and a group who had adult supervision.

Making The Child Care Decision

The success or failure of a self-care arrangement for children depends on many things. Wise parents will choose child care arrangements carefully and weigh many factors before deciding on self-care for their children.

Child's Age — A child younger than 9 or 10 years of age probably should not be left alone. Older children should be able to behave maturely, make good decisions and be willing to stay alone.

Child's Personality — A child who has a strong sense of independence and initiative will be more successful in self-care than one who is shy or fearful.

Child's Stage of Development — An adolescent experiencing a difficult time may be a poor candidate for self-care until these difficulties pass or until the adolescent can demonstrate the maturity and responsibility necessary for parents to feel confident that self-care is an acceptable arrangement.

Family Structure — An only child will have a different experience in self-care than one with older or younger brothers or sisters. Siblings can be a help and comfort, or they can be a problem if they do not get along and are unkind to one another. Older children left to care for younger ones may feel proud to be given the responsibility, or may feel frightened or resentful if it is more than they can handle.

Parental Attitudes—Parents must continually monitor the child care arrangement. They should listen carefully to their children, consult with them and be willing to make changes in the arrangement when necessary. Children who are able to discuss problems and fears with mom and dad and who feel loved will probably feel secure when staying alone.

Parents who choose self-care for their children and who communicate that they are proud of and confident in them are more likely to find that their children will accept the arrangement and be able to manage it well. On the other hand, parents who are disinterested in their children's feelings about being alone or taking care of siblings, or who decide that children will stay alone, like it or not, may meet resistance. They may also find themselves uneasy about the child's behavior when left alone.

Preparation of The Child—The child who is prepared with self-care skills is more self-confident and able to handle many situations. Survival skills training programs are available to children and their parents in many communities. They include such topics as safety and emergency procedures; simple house rules; first aid; coping with loneliness, boredom and fears; getting along with peers and siblings; learning to use kitchen equipment; and how to prepare healthy snacks. Such training can make both parents and children feel more relaxed about self-care.

Parental Feelings—Parents who feel trapped into leaving their children in self-care by the lack of alternatives are likely to experience tension, uneasiness and perhaps guilt feelings. Children are affected by their parents' feelings and may experience an exaggerated sense of discomfort or fear when home alone.

Neighborhood—Some neighborhoods are safer than others. The presence of heavy traffic, a gravel pit, a construction site or unfriendly people, for example, create safety hazards for any child. Caring and supportive neighbors can help self-care go smoothly. Parents sometimes make arrangements with neighbors to give the child a snack after school, help with minor problems or just be available for conversation when a youngster is feeling lonely. Knowing that a helpful neighbor is nearby should a crisis occur can help parents relax about their children's safety as they concentrate on their own daily responsibilities.

Parents who find they must leave children alone in a neighborhood that is not very safe can set up a support system for them. Some examples: a nearby helpful adult, phone numbers of parents, relatives and emergency personnel near the phone, instructions for what to do in an emergency, rules for behavior at home clearly stated and posted, and the communication to children of love, trust and understanding.

If, after considering these factors, parents feel uncomfortable about leaving their children in self-care, they may want to consider other choices. Some possibilities are:

- Have an older neighborhood child come to the house after school.
- Have the child go to a neighbor's home.
- Enroll the child in an after school program sponsored by a local group, such as the YMCA.
- Help to organize an after school in-school program in a nearby public school building.
- Enroll the child in a local day care center with facilities and programs for school age children.
- Find a family day care home for the child.

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