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It was during the second World War that latch key children came to the country's attention. Fathers had gone off to war, and mothers had gone into industry, making the tanks, planes, uniforms and bullets the soldiers needed. The children went home with keys on chains, ribbons, a piece of string tied around their necks. Some mothers chose to work the night shift, called the "swing shift" and tucked their children in bed, locked the door and went to the factory. The country's response was prompt and comprehensive. Programs were set up in factories, in schools and community centers, to gather in all the children whose parents were busy with the war effort.

These programs closed promptly when the war ended, and women resumed their housewife roles. Today again there are large numbers of working mothers, but unlike in wartime, the country isn't organized to care for their children.

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How many kids are home alone?

According to the U.S. census, one third of all school age children in the United States are, for some part of the week, latch key kids; that is, they go home to an empty house or apartment. The total number may be between five and seven million children between five and 13 years old. Marian Wright Edelman, the director of the Children's Defense Fund, thinks it's close to 16 million children. The Census Bureau found that 15% were home alone before school, 76% after school and 9% at night. Presumably, the 9% have parents who work night shifts.

One-half of all children in the country age 12 to 14 are home alone an average of seven hours a week. The very poor in America are less likely to leave their children alone at home, or allow them to go home alone, than families who earn twice the poverty income. This is probably because the very poor live in less safe neighborhoods, and have fewer friends or family who can step in, in case of emergency. In spite of the hours spent on the job, working mothers spend an average of five-and-a-half hours a day with their children.

Home alone - What are the effects?

When latch key children are functioning well, we don't hear about them. But we do hear about the one-third of all complaints to child welfare agencies which involve latch key children. We know about the 51% who are doing poorly in school. Most teachers believe that being alone at home is the number one cause of school failure. The afternoon hours are the peak time for juvenile crime. In the last 11 years, juvenile crime has increased 48%. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development found that 8th graders who are alone 11 hours a week are twice as likely to abuse

drugs as adolescents who are busy after school. The Council also found that teens who have sexual intercourse do it in the afternoon in the home of boys whose parents work. Unsupervised children are more likely to become depressed, smoke cigarettes and marijuana and drink alcohol. They are also more likely to be the victims of crimes. When home alone latch key children generally watch television, eat snacks, play with pets and fight with siblings.

Making the decision: When is a child ready to be home alone?

Personality characteristics, skills, and maturity are useful criteria for determining a child's readiness to be home alone. Personality doesn't generally change much with age, although children can learn to modify some of their reactions as they learn what is expected of them. There are some children who find it very difficult to be alone, some who need time and gradual exposure to become accustomed to being by themselves, and some who adapt easily.

The personality characteristics of the child who is ready

The child who

- is not fearful, feels at ease in the world and self confident
- is calm, not excitable, when something unexpected happens
- is outgoing, talks about his or her feelings and thoughts readily with parents and others
- admits wrongdoing, even when expecting disapproval
- has courage enough to resist pressure from friends and others

The rate at which children acquire the skills and the milestones of maturity varies, but the following provide some general guidance.

The skills of the child who is ready

The child who

- can clearly state and spell his or her full name, address and telephone number
- can clearly state his or her parents' names, employers, addresses of work places, work telephone numbers
- knows how to dial 911 and give information
- knows not to enter home if it looks suspicious
- knows what to do if he or she is followed
- knows not to play alone outside the home
- knows how to answer the telephone when alone at home
- knows what to do in case of fire
- plays "What if?" games with his or her parents
- helps to make the family's rules and knows the emergency back-up plan

The milestones of maturity of the child who is ready

The child who

- Assumes responsibility with pride and pleasure
- Follows directions well

- Is a good problem solver
- Takes initiative without being asked or reminded
- Has learned "life skills" which include good conflict resolution, age appropriate competence, identity linked to real abilities and a strong sense of worth
- Has good peer relationships and is involved in community service and programs

Making it work: Helping children acquire these characteristics

The personality characteristics are innate and observable early in life. Personality traits, however, are not immutable. Parents can help children if they

- offer encouragement from infancy on, correct gently, say that everyone has to learn to do certain things and this takes time, and then praise all efforts made, children will strive to please
- are sensitive to and accepting of their child's temperament and reactions. This builds the child's confidence, sense of security, openness to new experiences, pleasure in accomplishing tasks and courage to act
- discuss things with their children uncritically, accept their children's point of view before offering alternatives, reassure children who have done wrong that they only made a mistake and are too smart to repeat it. This results in children who readily tell their parents everything that happens in their lives

On the other hand, parents who

- constantly tell their children what to do and how to do it, and then remind them constantly don't raise self starters
- ask their children to do things that are too complex or require greater maturity than the child has, force their children to fail, and lose self confidence
- label their children as "bad," or "lazy" or "messy," or any undesirable trait, confirm that behavior. If children are labeled in this way s by their parents, whom they consider all-knowing, they assume they must indeed be "bad" or "lazy" or "messy," and the behaviors are confirmed. Criticism and hurt feelings only lead to bad behavior; if children are made to feel bad they can't act good!

The environment and readiness: the neighborhood and the family

In addition to the child's readiness to be alone before or after school, certain characteristics of the home environment need to be considered. Some of these are easy to control; some are not:

- the safety of the neighborhood, -- can a child safely walk home, or get from the bus to the door without risk?
- are there adults nearby and accessible, always available, and familiar to the child or children? Is there a backup plan?
- how much time is involved? How long must the child be alone? Is there a planned structure of activities planned for the time alone?
- are there siblings? Pets? What are the ages of the siblings?
- is the home equipped with dead bolts, fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, first aid kit,

evacuation plan, emergency phone numbers by the telephone, flashlights and batteries, money in a hiding place known to the child, lights on timers so that the child doesn't get home to a dark home in winter, all liquor locked, a cell phone for the child with the important numbers in it, a hidden key or a key left with a reliable neighbor who is sure to be home?

- is there time to set aside every single day for a quiet talk, a review of the day, an opportunity to tell the child how wonderfully responsible he or she is, and a willingness to help the child with whatever is current in her or his life, homework, a problem with another child at school, a wish for a special snack?

Other options

In many communities there are activities for school age children whose parents work and cannot be at home in the afternoon. The importance of looking into these is stressed by our country's most respected child development professionals. According to James Comer of Yale University, "the period between 10 and 15 years is a time when young people re-examine their attitudes and values. They are being pressured by peers. They need to be protected by responsible adults who will help them examine and counter some of these attitudes."

The activities available vary as does the cost. Some are more popular with children than others, and some are more rewarding, but all are preferable to sitting at home in front of the television. Things to consider:

- many schools have after school programs, and some communities have "Y's" which offer after school programs
- some after school programs are based on sports and playing on teams
- some children benefit from being tutored in certain subjects. Some schools have after-school homework programs
- some children are interested in, or can become interested in lessons in a variety of skills, piano, other musical instruments, ballet, art, theatre/drama, choir, glee club
- some gyms and health clubs have programs for young children
- public libraries have film programs and clubs organized around interests or activities
- many communities have Boys and Girls Clubs
- children can volunteer to do community service
- children can also tutor younger children, an activity which usually benefits the tutors even more than the tutees, and is excellent for both

These programs can vary in cost or are free, depending upon the particular activity and the age of the child. All of them offer the opportunity to acquire skills and knowledge that are useful throughout life. Children who are not learning anything for hours every week are at a distinct disadvantage compared to children who are engaged in enriching activities.

In the words of T. Berry Brazelton, of Harvard University: "During these all important bridge years between childhood and adulthood, kids really do need something constructive to do, and they also still need to have their activities supervised. Most of all, they need to know that their parents care about them, are involved in their lives, and have their best interests at heart."

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