

## Parents can make time alone easier for latchkey children

NEWARK, Del. — Who takes care of children in the morning when parents must leave for work before school opens — or in the afternoon before parents arrive home? Many times it's the children themselves.

"Having school-age children supervise themselves for a part of each weekday is sometimes the only option for working parents," says Sally Foulke, University of Delaware extension home economist.

"Although self-care can be a positive experience that enhances a child's feelings of competence and self-worth, 25 percent of latchkey children have trouble with

self-care." The home economist offers some suggestions for parents to help their children feel more comfortable about the latchkey situation.

Most children travel to and from school either by walking or riding a bus. A survival card to carry on their daily trip can give young children a sense of security. It should include the child's name, address, phone number at home, parents' work numbers, the name of a person to contact in case of injury, and money to make a phone call (a quarter taped to the back of the card).

"Parents should discuss the importance of the card, the meaning of emergency money, and

some of the places to keep the card — perhaps in a lunchbox, bookbag or pocket," Foulke says.

An emergency card kept by the phone at home can help supply the confidence and the means to manage a crisis. Children should be taught what to do in case of an emergency, whom to call, and how to dial a telephone. Besides the 911 number for fire, police and medical emergencies, the card should include parents' work numbers and the number of family friend or neighbor.

"The telephone is an important way to stay in touch," says Foulke. "But parents should establish rules for its use. It's frustrating to get a constant busy signal when

trying to reach a child. Many parents require a check-in call as reassurance that their child has arrived home safely." When a stranger calls, Foulke suggests that children say their parents are walking the dog, taking a nap or simply can't come to the phone.

Parents should also discuss what a child alone should do if a stranger comes to the door and wants to come inside. They should make the home as burglar-proof as possible and assure the child that this has been done, says Foulke.

The home economist also suggests that parents help their children set up a routine that includes regular snacks, chores, homework and playtime. "Planned activities keep children occupied and help minimize the fear of staying alone," she ex-

plains.

If friends are allowed to visit, set up visitation rules, she says. "Children also need a checklist of things to do before leaving the house. These might include turning off lights and water, closing and locking windows, bringing in — or putting out — the dog or cat, locking all doors and taking the key. A child will need to get a lunch, books and homework before leaving in the morning.

"Be punctual," Foulke advises parents. "Children need to know that they can expect you at a certain time. Also, let them know that it's O.K. to feel lonely and fearful at times. Set aside some time to discuss the day's events with them. Children need a little extra attention at the end of a day spent alone."

## Fear is common among latchkey children

NEWARK, Del. — A child waits alone in an empty house after school until mom or dad comes home from work. The two hours drag into an eternity. Noises in the house are amplified by the silence. A creaking board becomes the footstep of an intruder. Quickly, the television set is turned on full-blast to drown out the sounds of the house as well as the child's loneliness.

"As a result of their situation, latchkey children face special problems," says Sally Foulke, University of Delaware extension home economist. "Often a child, not wanting to disappoint parents, will say that everything is fine. Many parents are unaware of the extreme anxiety children may experience. Parents need to develop open communication about a child's fears."

For safety and legal reasons, parents may forbid children to go outside once they are home, or prohibit them from entertaining friends inside the house. The result is isolation, loneliness and anxiety.

"Feelings of fear are more frequent and enduring among latchkey children than children who are under continuous adult care," says Foulke. "Research shows that some latchkey children cope with fear by excessive use of the telephone or television, turning on a number of lights or conducting security checks. Some children may even carry an old shoe or baseball bat for protection."

Foulke says that children often act on assumptions based on limited information. This is because they haven't matured enough yet to alter their reactions to cope with changed circumstances. An example would be a child who loses a key, goes to a neighbor as instructed but finds the neighbor isn't home. What should the child do except sit on the porch, alone and unprotected, until someone arrives?

Many children have a sibling to share their self-care time. But this may cause additional problems. "Because their need to express frustration is so great, children alone often fight over everything

and anything," says the home economist. "An older child who is responsible for a younger one may oversupervise or leave the sibling alone while he or she runs off to join friends."

Younger children who are oversupervised may not develop self-care skills. Also, an older child who is an unwilling babysitter is likely to feel resentful. While babysitting can be an important lesson in responsibility, it shouldn't be at the expense of all of an older child's free time.

It is important for parents to help their children adjust to self-care, says Foulke. Research shows that latchkey children most commonly fear break-ins, physical assault, fires, and sibling conflicts that might result in injury or property damage. She suggests parents discuss these fears with their children and develop safety strategies. Parents should regularly evaluate the self-care situation and be prepared to make other child-care arrangements if necessary.

## BACK HOME

By Michelle S. Rodgers



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### Latch Key Link

Well, that new puppy did arrive under our Christmas tree this year. Our collie puppy is an adorable furball full of energy and we've enjoyed hours of playing together. But vacation quickly ended and I was going back to work, leaving the puppy at home to entertain herself until I returned. We both suffered minor anxiety separations, but some pre-planning helped to make it a workable situation.

In many of our homes today, there is a great deal more than puppies waiting at home for parents. Every day over six million children are returning home from school to an empty house and several hours on their hands. "Latch key" is a term for these children who carry their own keys and are responsible for their own well being until their parents arrive home from work. These children have to contend with situations like strangers at the door, boredom, loneliness and household mishaps. They must also be prepared to deal with emergencies such as fire, injury, and break-ins. Some of these crises are difficult for adults to manage.

Is it asking too much of a child to handle such incidents of domestic life? The answer depends on the child, the parent and the preparation.

No child should be left alone without first determining whether he or she is ready for it. And that means anticipating situations, discussing possible reactions, and allowing plenty of opportunities for feedback and trial runs. Kids who seem ready will need lots of adult support. Parents or a backup should be available by phone, and a neighbor who is both willing and usually home should be designated for help in emergencies. Above all, parents must be prepared to accept the possibility that the circumstances aren't right or a child is not mature enough to stay alone. In some situations extended day care programs at schools or adult supervision provide the best solution.

You must know your own child.

Your child's level of maturity is far more important than his chronological age when it comes to determining whether he is capable of being at home alone for a few hours.

Whether your child is at home alone for an occasional hour or so, one day a week, or every day, you should review and discuss the following instructions before the first trial run.

Keep your key out of sight. A child who carries a house key should wear it on a chain under a shirt or dress or pinned to the inside of a pocket. Displaying a key alerts people that the child is alone. Leave a spare key with a neighbor and go over the route home to determine the amount of time it usually takes.

Never talk to strangers or agree to get in their cars. Tell your child that if someone tries to insist, he or she should run to a neighbor's home if possible.

Never tell anyone who calls on the phone that you're home alone. Try some practice sessions with your child on the phone and one liners that don't draw attention to the fact that he is home alone. Have a list of important phone numbers posted by the phone.

If there is a fire, use fire escape routes that you have planned out and rehearsed.

Also, you will want to make up a list and discuss other potential problems as they relate to your situation. Work out a phone call system, discipline guidelines, how to handle strangers at the door, first aid treatment, and a list of friends who are allowed to visit until you get home.

Preparing your child to stay alone and to handle the responsibilities involved is an ongoing process that actually started in early childhood. A latch key situation generally does assist a child in becoming more resourceful, self confident and grown up. When a child feels that you trust him, he feels good about himself. You may not realize it, but your child is learning to become independent, a step toward adulthood.

## Toll-free line open for kids in Lancaster County

LANCASTER — Today there are more and more single-parent and two paycheck families than ever before. Consequently, the number of young school-age children at home without adult supervision is on the rise.

Usually the "latch-key" child knows where one or both parents is and has a way of reaching one of them in case of an emergency. But what happens when a youngster who is caught in a situation he or she cannot handle can't contact a parent?

Maybe there's a frightening storm outdoors...a hamster got out of its cage...parents are overdue getting home...school is canceled because of icy roads...or maybe the child is upset by a bad day at school or is lonely and needs someone to talk to.

To provide reassurance and

support for children alone at home, CONTACT KIDS-LINE, a 24-hour confidential phone line, is offered to elementary school children in Lancaster County. The KIDS-LINE is not meant to replace usual emergency numbers or established family procedures, nor is it intended to take the place of parental responsibility.

It is designed to help be supportive along with parents, in the

hope that the service will help minimize the anxieties of both working parents and their children.

CONTACT KIDS-LINE is available for elementary age children who are home alone or need a friend to talk to. Anyone in Lancaster County can call collect.

KIDS-LINE will be staffed by adults who have successfully completed the 60-hour CONTACT training program.



## Family Living

