

# TAKING TIME

by Rebecca Wolf

Extension Home Economist



In June, school children will be dismissed for summer vacation. Knowing this, many parents are scurrying around, bargaining with friends, relatives, and neighbors--panicked that they will be unable to find summer care for their children.

More than 5-million American school children are labeled as "latchkey kids". These children return after classes to an empty home for part of the afternoon. When summer arrives, these children are faced with being unattended not for a few hours but for an entire day.

Other children may seem

responsible enough to take care of themselves for one or two hours, but a whole day without supervision may be risky. And so as spring turns to summer, parents search for safe, enjoyable places that provide school-age child care.

Fortunately in many areas, community groups provide day time programs for school children. If you are a parent, investigate local playground, day camp, Girls' and Boys' Clubs, and YM/YWCA programs.

But first, think carefully about your needs and your child's needs. How much supervision does your son require? Would he be able to

stay at home with a next door neighbor checking on him each day? How much can you afford? Does your toddler's day care provider accept school children during the summer months?

If you think your daughter is independent enough to care for herself during the day (or if you think an older child will be able to give her adequate help), you need to take a few evenings to help her prepare for his time.

Many parents fear kidnapping and other "outsider" threats to their children's safety. But home accidents and fires account for far more injuries and deaths among children. Both types of situations should be discussed. With your child, PRACTICE what to do when there's a fire at home, how to answer the phone and door without letting anyone know that he or she is alone, how to get help in an emergency and simply how to deal with boredom, loneliness, and fear.

Check the local phone directory for hotlines for kids. Your town may have an organization that provides a listening ear for lonely, frightened kids.

Why not create an "I'm Bored" bag? This is an excellent tool for a child who will be alone. Take a brown paper lunch bag and ask your child to decorate it with his or her name and pictures. Then cut ten pieces of paper. On each slip, your child should write one thing he or she likes to do (shoot basket-

ball, read, play with the cat, put together a puzzle). Cut five more pieces of paper. On those write his or her chores or contributions to the home (make the bed, feed the dog, take out the trash).

Then each time your child's bored, draw a slip from the bag. He or she has the privilege of not doing the first suggestion and may choose another slip. BUT he or she must do the next one. This is a way to give your child some independence.

If you decide your child is not mature enough to be by himself, you need to take time to select a quality provider to care for him. In our area, referral agencies may be able to help you with this task for a fee. A more informal referral network exists in the area, too. Just ask your neighbors, co-workers, other parents in your PTA group about the options they know.

Visit and speak personally with every potential provider. If possible, have your child come along with you. School children will be able to tell you if the setting and person is someone they would be comfortable with.

Be sure to ask questions about payment. Do you have to pay for the week your family is on vacation? Will there be additional costs for day trips to museums, parks, and the pool? Will the provider care for children of a variety

of ages or just school-age kids? How do you feel about that? Will you need to adjust your work schedule in order to pick up your child at this location?

Ask about the provider's plans for the child's time. A school-age child does not need constant supervision. Children should be able to play outside, to choose some activities for quiet times. They need to be developing the abilities to make choices and entertain themselves.

Be sure you know what your family budget can afford. You may need to investigate ways to swap services. Could you babysit in the evenings for a friend who watches your daughter several days each week?

This whole process takes time. Start now. Plan to put as much effort, if not more, into finding quality care as you would into purchasing a new car. Your child deserves the best option available to you.

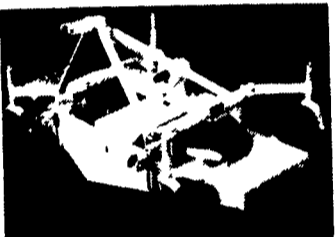
Try a cheeseburger duo like:

- a Swiss and Muenster Burger on rye bread.
- a Brick and Colby Burger on a whole wheat roll.
- a Blue and Cheddar Burger on an onion roll.
- a Mozzarella and Monterey Jack Burger on Italian bread.

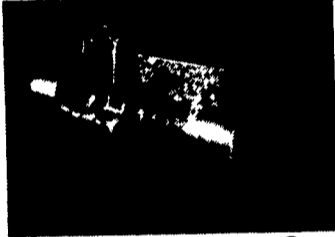
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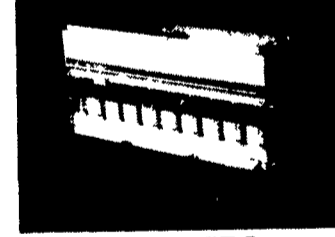
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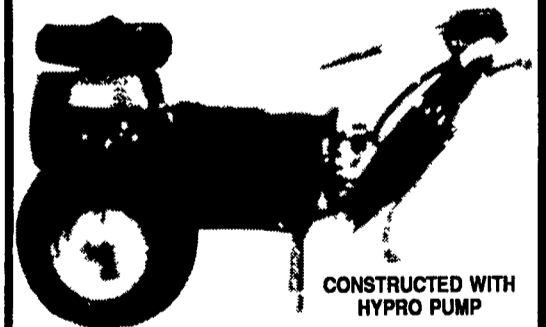
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