



Guidelines for Parents of Latchkey Children

No one knows exactly how many latchkey children there are in the United States, but estimates range from 2.5 million to 7 million. If you have latchkey children—youngsters who stay home without adult supervision—there are ways to ensure that they stay safe and happy.



Are your children mature enough?

Child care experts debate the effects of letting children care for themselves. Some research shows that latchkey children develop independence, resourcefulness and a sense of responsibility. Some research indicates that loneliness and depression can develop in children left on their own for extended periods of time.

Most parents don't feel comfortable leaving children under 10 on their own for several hours. When more than one child is involved, consider other options. Children under 13 may have a hard time supervising a younger sibling.

If your children seem overly apprehensive or fearful about being home alone, listen carefully to their concerns. Take time to help them adjust, but consider other after-school care options if your children are extremely uncomfortable with the arrangement.

Prepare your children.

Once you and your children have decided on a latchkey arrangement, set some ground rules and train them to look after themselves.

- ✓ Arrange a time for your children to check in with you by phone after they return home.
- ✓ With your children's input, make a simple schedule for homework, chores and play time.
- ✓ Teach your children how to prepare snacks and clean up after themselves.
- ✓ Have your children memorize family names, addresses and phone numbers.
- ✓ Discuss how to get help in the event of an emergency.
- ✓ Keep emergency phone numbers by the phone.
- ✓ Prepare a household emergency kit that includes a working flashlight and a battery-operated, transistor radio your children can use in case of a power failure.
- ✓ Show your children how to lock doors and windows.
- ✓ Teach your children how to recognize and take precautions against anything unusual when they arrive home, such as a broken window or an open door.
- ✓ Encourage problem-solving by asking your children to propose solutions to situations that may arise.
- ✓ Tape first aid information inside a first aid kit kept in an accessible location.
- ✓ Show your children how to treat and bandage cuts and burns.

Who else can help?

While your children may feel comfortable taking care of themselves, it's always important to know that there are other adults who can help.

- ✓ Your community may have hot lines, classes and a neighborhood "safe house" program for latchkey children.
- ✓ Consider making arrangements with another family to keep your children until you can pick them up.
- ✓ Ask grandparents or other relatives to look after your children.
- ✓ Hired household help, neighbors or older adults may lend a hand on occasion.