

<Four photos go with this article.>

Tips and guidelines for keeping latchkey kids safe

Latchkey kids are school-aged children who regularly must spend their after-school hours alone at home, unsupervised by an adult, until their parents come home from work. The parents give their children a key to the house with a set of instructions, rules, and guidelines to follow, and hope for the best. Many of the parents are uneasy about doing this, but often it is the only option they have. Their choices are to have their children:

- 1) Stay at a friend's or relative's house (not often possible on a regular basis).
- 2) Go to a day care facility after school (not available in all areas; too costly for some parents).
- 3) Be enrolled in a community based child-care program or attend after-school community based activities (not available in all areas).
- 4) Be a latchkey kid.

Currently, there are over 25 million latchkey kids. Some families adapt and adjust to latchkey living easier than others. Some latchkey children actually enjoy the freedom of having the house to themselves, of being on their own. They learn to be responsible and take care of themselves. Many develop a sense of pride at being able to handle themselves for a period of time without having an adult around.

Other children become nervous and anxious at the prospect of coming home to an empty house and/or following rules and guidelines without the help and/or supervision of an adult. They do not want (nor do they like) taking care of themselves or being without someone to take care of them. In these instances, when there is no other alternative, parents must work closely with these children to minimize their fears and maximize their well-being.

Many parents of latchkey kids worry about their children's safety. They are concerned because studies indicate that latchkey kids are more prone to receiving childhood injuries, and older latchkey children are more apt to become involved in smoking, alcohol, drugs, and early sexual experiences.

Despite the dangers to latchkey living, parents can safeguard their children by teaching them the following:

What every latchkey kid should know – tips and guidelines

- 1) Keep the house key hidden from view (in a pocket, shoe, sock, or ???). The key should never be worn on a string or chain around the neck advertising that mom and dad won't be home.
- 2) What to do if the house key is lost.
- 3) Come straight home from school unless previous arrangements have been made.

- 4) Don't enter the house if something looks wrong ... door open, window broken.
- 5) Lock the door immediately after entering the house.
- 6) Call mom or dad as soon as you get home.
- 7) Never let anyone in the house — and that means NO ONE – FOR ANY REASON ... no friends, no neighbors, no strangers, even if you are told “it's an emergency.” NO ONE COMES IN!
- 8) Don't answer the doorbell under any circumstances, and certainly don't open the door “to see who it is.”
- 9) Don't take short-cuts to or from school (always take the same route as directed by mom or dad).
- 10) Never accept a ride from anyone.
- 11) Don't play outside until mom or dad come home.
- 12) Don't use the stove when mom or dad aren't home.
- 13) Never tell anyone on the phone that your parents aren't home. Tell them mom is busy or dad is outside, please call back later.
- 14) Learn how to call mom/dad on the phone, and how to contact 911, fire, police, and a neighbor friend in case you need someone right away.

A tip for parents

Role-play each of the above points with your child instead of just talking about them. This will help prepare the child to deal with a variety of situations quickly, effectively, and in a positive way. In each of the following examples, the parent makes the queries and coaches the child until a correct, appropriate response is made.

- You need to reach mom or dad at work. What is their number?
- On the way home from school, a neighbor offers you money to go to the store for them. What do you do?
- Your friend asks you to come to his house after school. What do you say?
- When you get home, a man is standing in front of your door telling you he is sick ... can he use the phone. What do you do?
- You get home from school and find you lost your key. What do you do?

Remember:

Praise your child when things go smoothly. And, if something does go wrong, don't act as if it's the end of the world. Instead, treat the situation as a learning experience towards better judgment and more responsible choices in the future. Doing so unlocks the door to learning, understanding, and your child's safety.