

Unlocking the Door to Latchkey Kid Safety

It's hard to believe that the summer is almost over and the kids are back in school. That means that over 25 million kids will come home from school to an unsupervised empty house because their parents will be at work. These kids are called "latchkey kids" because they are given a key to their home so they can let themselves in when school is over.

- What do the kids do when they are home alone?
- Are they safe?
- Why do the parents leave the kids alone in the first place?

There is no one answer to all of these questions. In today's world, it is not uncommon for both parents to find it necessary to work full time to support the family ... and in single parent homes, the parent may find it financially essential to have more than one job. Since the school day is shorter than the work day, the latchkey kid has several hours each day when the parents will not be there to supervise them. Daycare may not be available for these children, or it may be too costly for the parents. Some schools and organizations provide before and after school programs and activities for these children ... but these aren't available nationwide. So, what it all boils down to is ... in many instances, parents have no choice but to give the children a key to the house, along with a set of rules and guidelines to follow. This isn't necessarily a bad situation ... it helps children gain a sense of responsibility, and some children may actually enjoy being the first one home.

Although there are many dangers to leaving a child home alone, these can be minimized through continual training and encouragement. Here are some tips and guidelines to help you keep your child safe.

Tips for the parent:

- 1) Make the house safe. Be sure that all firearms and poisons are locked up.
- 2) Establish rules and guidelines the child must follow when you are not there.
- 3) Teach the child how to handle emergencies (what to do in case of a fire, when/how to call 911, etc.).
- 4) Teach the child how to use a first-aid kit in case of a burn, bite, cut, or scrape.
- 5) Place a phone list beside each phone in the house ... with your phone number, 911, fire, police, a neighbor or someone the child can contact should the need arise or you are not available by phone.
- 6) Prepare a schedule or routine for your child to follow when he/she gets home:
 - a) Unlock the door.
 - b) Come into the house.
 - c) LOCK DOOR IMMEDIATELY.

- d) Put key ____ (where?).
 - e) Hang up coat.
 - f) Have snack (leave something the child won't have to cook or heat).
 - g) Do homework.
 - h) Stack dishes.
 - i) Free time ... TV, reading, games till mom and dad come home.
- 7) If your child does not check in as he/she should within a reasonable time after school, start investigating the child's whereabouts.
- 8) Coach your child so he/she will know how to handle situations. Below are some examples:
- a) You need to reach mom or dad at work. What is their number?
 - b) On the way home from school, a neighbor offers you money to go to the store for them. What do you do?
 - c) 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?
 - d) Your friend asks you to come to his house after school. What do you say?
 - e) You get home from school and find you lost your key. What do you do?

Tips for the child:

- 1) Keep the house key hidden from view (in a pocket, shoe, sock, or ???). The key shouldn't be worn on a string or chain around the neck advertising that mom and dad won't be home.
- 2) Know what to do in case the key is lost.
- 3) Don't enter the house if something looks wrong ... door open, window broken.
- 4) Lock the door immediately after entering the house.
- 5) Call mom or dad immediately as soon as you get home.
- 6) Never let anyone in the house — and that means NO ONE ... no friends, no neighbors, no strangers, even if you are told "it's an emergency."
- 7) Don't answer the doorbell under any circumstances, and certainly don't open the door "to see who it is."
- 8) Come straight home from school unless other arrangements have been made beforehand.
- 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 parent's 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 or friend in case you need someone right away.

In conclusion, parents, remember to talk with your child about the areas of danger. Role-play the points covered here so the child will better understand what you expect, and what they should and shouldn't do. Roll-playing will also prepare them to act quickly, in a positive and effective way when and if a suspect or dangerous situation arises.

And most of all ... remember to 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 ... treat it as a learning experience towards better judgment and more responsible choices in the future.

Do this, and you'll unlock the door to your child's safety.

#