

## I. Overview

Traditionally, attention to the problems of latch-key children has been focused on the supervision of elementary school children before and after school and on the days that schools are closed. Yet, there is a growing consensus that young adolescents, between the ages of 10 and 15, may also be at risk when left on a regular basis in unsupervised settings. Many parents and professionals feel that young teens, who are not engaged in meaningful activities, may be more susceptible to peer pressure and therefore more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors or become victims or perpetrators of crime. A study by Steinberg (1986) of 10 to 15 year olds in Wisconsin found that the further children are removed from adult supervision, the more susceptible they are to pressure from peers to engage in anti-social, negative behaviors. Those most susceptible were children who were "hanging out" in the neighborhood after school was over and whose parents did not know their whereabouts. A 1982 study by the Center for Early Adolescence (CEA) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Farel, 1983), which surveyed nearly 1,000 parents at 19 sites across the country on their preferences and needs for after-school activities for their 10 to 14 year olds, found that parents are worried about their children coming under the bad influence of peers, which may result in drinking, abusing drugs, stealing, fighting with other children, being beaten up, or engaging in gang activity.

Other researchers feel that concerns raised regarding the impact of self-care on younger children (ages 5 to 10) may also apply to young adolescents. These concerns include the extent to which young adolescents may be in danger of victimization (i.e., at risk of physical, sexual or psychological abuse by older children or adults) and at increased risk of injury from accidents. The CEA parent survey found that parents' greatest concerns about the interval between the time school ends and 6:00 PM were around safety issues. Parents worried most about sports' injuries, fires in the home and traffic accidents. They felt that the unsupervised neighborhood play, in which most children are involved, is neither safe nor constructive. Parents expressed fear that their children might become victims of sexual exploitation, drug pushers and robbers if in the streets or if at home alone.

Reports from the federal Agency for Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) study in Virginia and Minnesota (Applied Management Sciences, 1982) indicate that between one-third of Virginia parents and almost two-thirds of Minnesota families were in fear of accidents occurring when children were in self- or sibling care. Eight to nine percent of these families had experienced accidents when their children were alone. A more recent study (Hedin et al, 1986) of parents and students in grades K-8 in the Greater Minneapolis area, indicates that parents worry far more than do their children about the after-school hours. As in the CEA and ACYF studies, parents' first concern was about injuries to their children (80%). The next most frequent concern was watching too much T.V. and getting involved with the wrong kinds of friends (42% each), being kidnapped (40%), and being sexually abused (39%). These concerns were fairly uniform across all parents irrespective of the age of child, home location, socioeconomic status and family type.

In addition, there is some evidence that children left to fend for themselves may experience loneliness, be frightened, or worried, which may constrain their psychosocial development and lead to problems during their school years and beyond. According to the findings in the Greater Minneapolis Survey (Hedin et al, 1986), elementary and junior high school students have different concerns about the after-school hours. In response to a closed-ended questionnaire, getting hurt, being kidnapped, getting involved with the wrong kinds of friends, getting into fights, and being abused all ranked higher for 4th through 6th graders than for junior high students. For the older students being bored, wasting time, and not finishing chores and homework were of more concern. Girls have significantly more fears than boys: and urban youth have more fears than young adolescents in the suburbs. Elementary children in minority, single-parent families had the highest rates of concern (30% to 55%) regarding physical safety and survival. When students discussed worries and concerns in a group setting, the overriding fear was of someone breaking into their home and robbing and/or hurting them.

For young adolescents charged with the care of younger siblings, the premature granting of responsibility may add further stress affecting school performance and achievement as well as curtailing after-school involvement in activities which encourage constructive, social interaction and skill development. The CEA parents' study corroborates these findings. Parents expressed concern regarding older children having too much responsibility for younger siblings, and siblings spending too much time together unsupervised. Parents were concerned that the amount of time self-care children spend alone limits their opportunities to spend time with friends and to play outside. Parents are also concerned about the boredom many children experience and about the fact that their children may be spending too much time on the telephone, eating non-nutritious snacks and spending excessive amounts of non-constructive time watching television.

According to some researchers, there are indications that as more and more women enter the labor force, the absence of adult figures in the home during the day and the general lack of regular adult supervision during the out-of-school hours may encourage premature experimentation with sex among all income levels of adolescents (Long and Long, 1988). According to another researcher, the growth in the number of latch-key children has a disturbing parallel to the growing number of young adolescents exposed to drug and alcohol experimentation and abuse (Zigler, 1986).

In a recent study, (Long and Long, 1988), data collected from 362 randomly selected young adolescents showed that a significant minority (20%) were sexually active in their own homes during the hours when they were on their own. While the data did not indicate that latch-key children were significantly more involved in sexual behaviors than youngsters under continuous adult supervision, the data did show that sexual activity increased proportionally with the amount of time adolescents spent in self-care. The data also showed that latch-key adolescents residing in single parent households were more likely both to engage in sexual activity and to have sexual intercourse while their parent was away than teens from two-parent homes. Forty percent of teens from single-parent families were sexually active while their parent was away. The study also showed that teenage sexual