

Children in Self-Care: A New Perspective

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Editor's Note: CHILD WELFARE has published from time to time on the problem of latchkey children. The study described in this article, with the associated literature, moves the research base on so-called self-care a distinct step forward.

The inability of families to provide continuous care to children is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Since the 1950's, the need for nonparental child care has accelerated at an intimidating pace. Continuing changes in social structure, including a large increase in the proportion of women in the nation's labor force, increasing numbers of children living in single-parent households, the rise in family mobility and the decline of the availability of the extended family, have led professionals and policymakers to consider what these changes mean to the welfare of our nation's children [Galambos and Garbarino 1983; Long and Long 1982; Grollman and Sweder 1986; Robinson et al. 1986].

Although we know that many families leave their children unsupervised, it is not known precisely how many children are left in self-care, how and/or why the choice is made, and what the effects of self-care on the development and safety of the children may be.

Current estimates of the number of children in self-care range from 7% to 25% of the nation's 29 million school-age

children [Long and Long 1982; Hofferth and Cain 1987; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1987; Vandell and Corasaniti 1985]. These large discrepancies in incidence exist partly because of inconsistent definitions and because parents are reluctant to give out information about their child care methods.

Researchers have had difficulty in acquiring sample populations to study due to the informal and undefined nature of the self-care arrangement and the low profile of children left without supervision [Long and Long 1982; Rodman et al. 1985; Jones 1980]. Guilt, social stigma, and awareness on the part of parents that leaving their children unattended may appear irresponsible and is considered a form of neglect in most states, have prevented parents from reporting their child care methods accurately.

More important than incidence, and more difficult to determine, are the effects self-care arrangements have on children. Few empirical studies exist, but recent studies of the attributes of children in self-care in rural and suburban settings suggest that unsupervised children do not differ significantly from supervised children in terms of academic achievement and school adjustment [Galambos and Garbarino 1983; 1985; Vandell and Corasaniti 1985], locus of control and self-esteem [Rodman et al. 1985; Steinberg 1986], or peer relations [Vandell and Corasaniti 1985; Steinberg 1986]. In striking contrast, studies of urban children in self-care suggest that children at home alone often feel bored, lonely, isolated, and terrified [Long and Long 1982], and that they have lower academic achievement and social adjustment than supervised children [Woods 1972].

Although these studies are important first steps in defining and exploring this important social problem, they do not resolve most issues associated with children in self-care. The studies vary widely in methodology and findings, and are characterized by small sample sizes, nonprobability sampling, short-term timelines, and the use solely of pencil and paper measures of such dependent variables as academic achievement, social adjustment, and personality characteristics [Robinson et al. 1986].

In response to this lack of scientific data, more definitive study to determine causes, patterns, and consequences of self-care has been called for by child development and child welfare

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TABLE 1 Combined Results of Self-Care Survey

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Children Were Left Alone Occasionally</i>	<i>Regularly</i>
Kindergarten (N = 104)	75 (71%)	26 (25%)	3 (3%)
Grade 1 (N = 114)	72 (63%)	32 (28%)	10 (9%)
Grade 2 (N = 95)	52 (55%)	34 (36%)	9 (9%)
Grade 3 (N = 134)	57 (43%)	66 (49%)	11 (8%)
TOTAL (N = 447)	256 (57%)	158 (35%)	33 (7%)

researchers [Galambos and Garbarino 1983; Robinson et al. 1986; Rodman et al. 1985]. Experts cite the need for progressive research "in context," comparing groups of children in self-care in terms of family demographics, family histories, frequency and duration of unsupervised time, presence of siblings, and home structure imposed by absent parents [Galambos and Garbarino 1983; Robinson et al. 1986; Rodman et al. 1985].

Bronfenbrenner [1979] has put forth a model that encourages exploration of variables that can distinguish subgroups and causal factors in child care decisions, including the systems and settings of the child in self-care, the interaction between the child and various environments, family composition, social demographic characteristics, family power dynamics, communication styles, and sex roles.

Recognition of the need for more definitive research builds on the principal contribution of latchkey research to date, which is the conclusion that a great many variables seem to affect the experience and vulnerability of the child in a self-care setting [Garbarino 1981; Galambos and Garbarino 1983, 1985; Robinson et al. 1986]. Garbarino [1981] notes:

It is the premature granting of responsibility, particularly when it occurs in a negative emotional climate, that seems to be damaging. No social event affects all children or youth equally. Nearly all experiences are mediated by the quality and character of the family. Thus, we know that some kids will thrive on the opportunity of being a latchkey child. Others will just manage to cope. Still others will be at risk, and still others will be harmed. It is often difficult to separate the specific effects of the latchkey situation from the more general condition of the family.

Studies to date have not provided precise definitions of supervised and unsupervised environments, including clarification of the terms latchkey and self-care. Steinberg [1986] notes:

The most important conclusion from [his] study is that variations within the latchkey population—variations in the setting in which self-care takes place, variations in the extent to which absent parents maintain distal supervision of children, and variations in patterns of child rearing—are more important than are variations between adult care and self-care.

Finally, the most glaring omission in studies to date is the determination of vulnerability to child abuse and neglect when children are left in unsupervised settings. This article reports on a needs assessment and pilot study of risk to children, in kindergarten through grade 3, which dramatically highlights the need to study carefully the existing patterns of self-care and to develop resources responsive to need.

Methodology

To assess the need for programming to teach prevention skills to children in self-care, the authors conducted a needs assessment survey and piloted a behavioral simulation as a measure of risk. The combination of the survey and the behavioral simulation enabled a clearer and more valid assessment of self-care patterns with children ages five to nine years old than had previously been obtained.

The pivotal element of this study was the use of two self-care simulations that sought to extend the application of "measurable behavior" to evaluation of actual risk in a self-care situation [Fryer et al. 1987a, 1987b; Kraizer et al. 1988, 1989]. The simulations gave children a real-life opportunity to demonstrate behavioral skills on two tests associated with risk in self-care; answering the telephone and answering the door to a stranger trying to deliver a package.

Rural, urban, and suburban parents of 447 children were surveyed by telephone to determine patterns of self-care, if any. Virtually all the parents reported at first that they did not leave their children alone, but after describing to them the simulation that would be used to measure risk for children in self-care, the parents began to discuss their actual patterns of leaving children alone.

Results of Self-Care Survey

The authors found that 42% of the sample of 447 children (grades K-3) in rural, urban, and suburban settings were left in self-care at least "occasionally," if not "regularly" (see Table 1). It was apparent that as children got older, parents were more and more willing to leave them without supervision. Thus, the percentage of children left alone either occasionally or regularly in kindergarten was 28%, in first grade 37%, in second grade 45%, and in third grade 77%. These figures far exceed any previously published estimates. The finding that 42% of the total sample of children were left alone occasionally or regularly was significant new information, and analysis by rural, urban, and suburban groupings provided further insights.

Urban children were far more frequently left unattended occasionally at the kindergarten (k = 42%) and first grade level (1st = 45%) than were rural children (k = 21%, 1st = 25%) and suburban children (k = 25%, 1st = 22%). Urban children were also far more likely to be left alone regularly, particularly in first (1st = 18%) and second grade (2nd = 19%) than rural children (1st = 8%, 2nd = 8%) and suburban children (1st = 5%, 2nd = 3%).

The finding that so many young urban children were left without supervision brings to mind many questions about the relationship of circumstance to risk. In the interviews, these