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The role of the elementary school counselor in dealing with latchkey children

Abstract

Children's care of themselves in the absence of adult supervision has existed since the industrial revolution and is an important part of current reality. To ensure that keys to houses are not lost, many children, responsible for letting themselves into their homes after school, are required by their parents to wear keys on a chain around their necks. This explains where the term "latchkey" originated and why these kids are called this today. The latchkey problem is not new; it was a concern more than 80 years ago. Stroman and Duff (1982) reported that the theme of the 1943 American Association of School Administrators annual meeting expressed concern for the "doorkey" child. This problem resulted during the wartime years when many mothers worked in defense plants and fathers were absent in military service. As early as 1894, charities and day nurseries provided care for school-aged children (Seligson, Genser, Gannell, & Gray, 1983).

THE ROLE OF THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELOR IN DEALING
WITH LATCHKEY CHILDREN

A Research Paper

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by

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Children's care of themselves in the absence of adult supervision has existed since the industrial revolution and is an important part of current reality. To ensure that keys to houses are not lost, many children, responsible for letting themselves into their homes after school, are required by their parents to wear keys on a chain around their necks. This explains where the term "latchkey" originated and why these kids are called this today. The latchkey problem is not new; it was a concern more than 80 years ago. Stroman and Duff (1982) reported that the theme of the 1943 American Association of School Administrators annual meeting expressed concern for the "doorkey" child. This problem resulted during the wartime years when many mothers worked in defense plants and fathers were absent in military service. As early as 1894, charities and day nurseries provided care for school-aged children (Seligson, Genser, Gannell, & Gray, 1983).

In 1976 the United States Department of Commerce estimated that two million or 13% of the nation's children between the ages of 7 and 13 were without adult supervision before or after school hours. Others claimed that parents underreport the extent of self-care among school-aged children because of embarrassment or guilt (Long & Long, 1983). It is estimated that today there may be as many as six million latchkey

children in this country due to the increase of mothers in the labor force (Turkington, 1983).

The increasing numbers of latchkey children have alerted educators, politicians, and people from all walks of life concerned with the welfare of youth. There are many questions about the effects of the latchkey experience on child development and functioning that concern parents and educators. Counselors need to become more aware of potential problems and develop knowledge to assess latchkey conditions in a school setting and establish intervention programs when appropriate.

The purpose of this paper was, first, to determine if there is a need for counselor involvement with latchkey children, and, second, to examine counselor roles and functions concerning their involvement.

Establishing a Need for Counselor Intervention

The self-care method of child care has produced a variety of feelings in school-aged children. Some children feel more independent and responsible while other children feel afraid, isolated, and bored. The children who feel more responsible and independent gain personal benefit from those periods of time in which they feel solely responsible for the functioning of the house (Long & Long, 1983).

While some children feel responsible and independent, Thomas and Lynette Long, two prominent researchers on the feelings of latchkey children, reported that other children feel afraid, lonely and bored, and often will not reveal their fears to their parents. According to Long and Long (1983) most kids felt their parents left them alone out of necessity and did not want to add to their parents' worries by revealing their discomfort in being home alone.

Long and Long (1983) reported a 1980 study in Washington, D. C. which discovered that 40% of the children home alone were totally isolated and that 80% of the children home alone could not have friends over. The presence of siblings in the home often reduced the feelings of loneliness experienced by the latchkey child, but also increased the chance of fighting between siblings.

Woods (1972) studied 108 black fifth graders from low-income families in Philadelphia whose mothers worked outside the home. She found that the children who were left to care for themselves during nonschool hours had more academic and social problems than their peers who received adult supervision. But she also found that the full-time employment of mothers exerted a positive influence on their children's academic and social performance and that a mother's

relationship with her child and attitude toward her job are important factors in a child's adjustment.

A study by Long and Long (1982) found 30% of latchkey children had unusually high levels of recurring fear. The specific fears reportedly stemmed from the idea someone might break into the house, noises, outdoor darkness, rain, thunder, and the cries and barks of animals. Loneliness and boredom were also complaints of latchkey children.

Woods (1972) compared 61 adult-supervised with 47 unsupervised (self-care) fifth graders in Philadelphia on 106 outcome variables. She concluded that "unsupervised girls exhibit deficits in school environment and intelligence quotient as well as some difficulty in school relations" (Woods, 1972, p. 18).

Gold and Andres (1978) studied the sex-role concepts, personality adjustment, and academic achievements of 223 10-year-olds from working-class or middle-class families, some of whose mothers were employed full-time and some of whose mothers did not work outside the home. They found that these children's academic achievement was related to the employment status of their mothers, their own gender, the socioeconomic status of their families, and the behavior of their parents toward them. When Gold and Andres divided the sons of employed mothers into two groups, those who

received adult supervision and those who took care of themselves during nonschool hours, they found those boys who took care of themselves consistently lower than the others on all measures of social adjustment and academic achievement. A study by Ginsburg, Milne, Myers, and Ellman (1982) also found lower academic achievement among children from one-parent or two-parent families in which adults were employed full-time.

Research on the impact of self-care arrangements is limited, and it is important to stress that we know very little about the consequences of self-care for children's functioning and development. One thing is clear: Researchers are finding some negative consequences when children are left without adult supervision (Bundy & Boser, 1987).

Behaviors that are most commonly exhibited include:

1. Worry and fear according to studies have been reported with children who are in self-care arrangements for regular periods of time (Long & Long, 1984; Strother, 1984; Zill, 1983).

2. Feelings of loneliness and boredom seem to be experienced by children that go straight home after school and are not allowed to have friends over to play (Long & Long, 1984).

3. Diminished performance in school work is another effect on self-care on children. Strother (1984) found that children in self-care situations tended to have lower academic achievement than did children whose parents were not employed full-time and could spend time with them. This behavior is magnified when children are given the responsibility for care of younger siblings (Smith, 1984).

4. Parent-child communications are often hindered by self-care arrangements. Long and Long (1984) found that some children will persuade their parents to allow them to stay home to show their maturity and responsibility. When they have difficulties or worries they are hesitant to talk with their parents because they think they might make other child care arrangements or this might worry their parents.

5. Increased stress is another behavior latchkey children tend to exhibit. Elkind (1981) argues that latchkey children are expected to take on too much responsibility for their age. He feels they develop a higher rate of depression and personality problems during adolescence or later in life than their peers.

Research suggests that the environmental context may be the single most important factor in how well latchkey children adjust to their self-care (Galambos & Garbarino, 1983). A latchkey child, living in a relatively safe crime-free rural

setting, might have fewer problems adjusting than one who lives in an urban high-crime environment.

A network of counselors, parents, the school, and communities working together can alleviate many of the potential problems reported in the literature that latchkey children and their families face (Robinson, Rowland, & Coleman, 1986).

To combat the negative consequences latchkey children experience, counselor intervention seems appropriate, if not indeed necessary. The counselor needs to be a liaison between parents, school personnel, and the community.

Specific Goals of Counselors

School counselors are in a prime position to make their students' latchkey experiences easier (Toenniessen, Little, & Rosen, 1985).

At a time when the child's fears could be the greatest, strong school support, and in particular, counselor support is a must. Counselors need to become aware of potential problems and develop knowledge to assess latchkey conditions in a school setting and establish intervention techniques when appropriate.

Specifically, the counselor's goals in helping the latchkey individual should focus mainly upon fostering a

healthy climate that is conducive to building a positive self-concept in the child.

More and more articles are printed that emphasize methods through which parents can ready their children to stay home alone (Bundy & Boser, 1987). Such articles repeatedly stress the value of children's independence and learning responsibility. There is a rising concern among professionals that the message being given to parents is: It is acceptable, even desirable, for children to be regularly unsupervised after school if they have learned some basic skills (Scofield, 1984). Garbarino (1980) feels the risks outweigh the opportunities and that there should be suitable alternate ways to provide the potentially positive aspects of responsibility for self-care without inflicting the risks of being unsupervised.

What Can the School Counselor Do

A school counselor can approach the latchkey situation through many popular and widely used techniques which would include the following:

1. Individual counseling has always been one of the most frequently used methods of dealing with children experiencing problems. One of the main tasks would be to help children assess their feelings and learn techniques for handling these feelings. The counselor is cautioned, though,

to have specific goals in mind and have established interventions in place before counseling individually.

2. Group counseling is another means within the school setting that can be very successful. Small groups can be organized to promote interaction and support among the children who share the experience of having to deal with this latchkey situation. This approach reduces the feeling of being the only one in this situation. Support groups can be organized from this mode of counseling. A "buddy system" would be one such form of support group. Another benefit of group counseling is that it enables students to work together, with the direction of the counselor, in examining individual problem solving skills to be applied both at home and at school.

3. Classroom guidance units such as "Being in Charge" (Bundy & Boser, 1987) are designed to provide children with skills to cope more effectively with taking care of themselves at home. A basic assumption of programs such as this would be that each child will periodically experience self-care situations at some time or another so all children would benefit from the program.

4. Parental workshops to provide self-care training to parents can be a great benefit. Here counselors can recommend to parents that they discuss with their children such things

as their reasons for being outside the home, establishing rules for both parents and children, setting up emergency procedures, and making the home as secure as possible with locks and proper lighting. One thing that might be discussed would be the importance of the parent establishing individual alone time with their children which would include exploration of offspring's experiences and feelings. Parents returning immediately after work at the agreed upon time should also be encouraged.

5. Counselors can distribute literature on latchkey children through the schools to parents, students, teachers, and administrators. Research indicates that parents do worry about leaving their children alone. Farel (1984) found that parents most typically worry about safety, leaving children alone, use of their time, and peer influence. Literature can also be provided about community resources and lists of available publications on latchkey children.

6. In-service training for teachers and administrators can be conducted by the counselor. These should focus on awareness of the problems of latchkey children and present practical suggestions for dealing with and interacting with latchkey students. Teachers and administrators can play an important role in reframing the latchkey experience as an opportunity to develop independence, coping strategies, and

self-care skills. Training of teachers could also include instructions for implementing units on survival skills and the use of appropriate computer software in the classroom.

Conclusion

Elementary school counselors are aware that children in school experience varying degrees of discomfort and are at many different stages of development. No one doubts that there are risks for latchkey children which are real threats for many youngsters. The recent upswing in families in which the only parent or both parents work outside the home has produced the need for school counselor intervention. It has become very common in our society for children to take care of themselves for periods of time every day. It seems that the trend for having more and more latchkey children in our society, will not dissipate. This paper has attempted to review literature about the effects a latchkey situation has on a child and the role the school counselor plays in dealing with these children. According to this survey of literature, the elementary school counselor plays a necessary and important part in the lives of these children. His/her role is varied with a multitude of approaches and techniques. Each technique has its own merit and no approach seems to stand out as better or more successful than another. The elementary counselor needs to rely on his/her own professional judgment when using

one, an assortment of, or all of the approaches discussed to this paper.

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