

Latchkey Children - A Bolt from the Blue

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"What is done to children, they will do to society"

- Karl A. Menninger

Abstract

Along with the thought provoking advancement in this 21st century, a new generation popularly known as Latchkey children or Generation X has emerged because of the working parents. Latch key kid carries key to the latch on their house door to enter into the empty house and they are often left alone by the parents. The parents can follow certain precautions before leaving the child alone to prevent physical and mental distress. Leaving the child all alone has many benefits like being independent, freedom and confident. The ill effect of being a latchkey kid includes many problems like depression, anxiety, fear etc.

Keywords: Latch Key Child; Generation X

Introduction

Parents are the first role model in a Child's life, and they play a pivotal role in shaping their lives. Earlier it was not a burdensome task to rear a child with the aid of joint family system. But now with the advent of Nuclear family system, looking after a child has become a strenuous activity for the parents. Because of the financial crisis faced by many families, and the educational advancement had made both the parents began entering the workforce. When both the parents work, the child may access many materials they need, but this is not a substitute for the precious time spent by the parents. Children of working parents are referred to as "Latch Key Child".

Definition:

According to Berk (2007)

Latchkey children refers to 'self care' children or those children who look after themselves while their parents are at work and are regularly left unattended after school hours [1].

The concise oxford dictionary (2006)

'Latchkey' child is a child who is alone at home after school until a parent returns from work



Figure 1

History behind the term

- The term refers to the latchkey of a door to a house. The key is often strung around the child's neck or left hidden under a mat (or some other object) at the rear door to the property.
- The term seems to first appear in a CBC radio program called "Discussion Club - Topic: How War Affects Canadian Children" in 1942 due to the phenomenon of children being left home alone during World War II when the father would be enlisted into the armed forces and the mother would need to get a job. Given that the "Discussion Club" participants are all familiar with the term and allude to it being in colloquial usage, it likely predates 1942. In general, the term latchkey designates "those children between the ages of five and thirteen who care for themselves after the school day until their parents or guardians return home" [2].



Figure 1

Reasons for latch key children

- The gradual increase in the nuclear families lead to the absence of grand parents.
- Women education and Women empowerment has resulted in many ambitious working mothers.
- Money is required to meet the demands of the family.
- An inflation in the cost of living makes both the parents to work.
- Employment is needed to provide elite education and to create better career for the children.
- Increased divorce rate and the Single Parenting.
- Financial crisis.

Positive impacts on latchkey kid

- When both the parents work and earn money, the child needs can be easily fulfilled.
- Parents may assure a high quality life to the children.
- The children will take care of themselves and even their siblings which will gives maturity even at every young age.
- They tend to depend on others rarely and usually independent.
- Children will make use of this home alone time to involve in many extra-curricular activities which will make them to be multitalented.
- Children will realise the sacrifice of their parents which creates a strong emotional bonding between the families.
- Problem solving skills tend to be more among the latchkey children.
- Latchkey children exhibits creativity in doing works.
- Latchkey children know the value of money and spend money cautiously.
- They will handle stressful situations boldly.
- They have good decision making skills.
- They stay responsible.
- Leaving alone fosters the self confidence of the children.
- They learn time management easily.
- When they notice how their parents balance their work life and home life, it makes them more respectful towards them [3-5].

Negative impacts on latch key kid

- The effects of being a latchkey child differ with age. Loneliness, boredom and fear are very common for those younger than 10 years of age.
- In early teens, there is a greater susceptibility to peer pressure, such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity and smoking etc.
- They tend to develop a sense of insecurity.
- They may feel neglected.
- They are unable to share their problems with their parents during the day and at times even after the parents are back but too tired to listen to them.
- They do not get the love, attention and care from their parents.
- They might get detached from their parents in the long run since they spent very little time with them.
- They have to depend on others even for some basic needs like food, changing clothes etc [5].
- In one study, middle school students left home alone for more than three hours a day reported higher levels of behaviour problems, higher rates of depression and lower levels of self esteem than other students.
- Children also has Conduct disorders, hyperactivity.
- Anxiety: Latchkey kids can easily become isolated and avoid social situations.
- Stress: They feel stressed without any parental support in their day to day activities.
- Panic attacks: Symptoms may include mild hallucinations or deformation of real objects.
- Adjustment disorder: children are forced into a role that isn't suitable for their age. In response they may develop adjustment disorders.
- Aggression: Latchkey kids may become aggressive or arrogant towards their parents, or may display rebellious behaviour due to the lack of everyday boundaries [5].
- Latchkey kids can also suffer physical symptoms. These include altered sleep patterns, appetite loss, weight loss and gastrointestinal disorders.

Tips for parents to rear latch key child

- The parents can set a trial period where they can leave the child alone and monitor the child unknowingly.
- Teach the child to lock and unlock the door.
- Instruct the child not to tamper with electrical equipment or play near the balcony.
- Teach them about good touch and bad touch.
- Keep the hazardous objects like knives, scissors, lighter, matchbox, medicines, disinfectants, etc away from the reach of children.
- Keep lens in the house door that guides in opening the doors. Instruct the child not to open the door for strangers.
- Set limits in watching TV and also about TV shows.
- Keep smoke detectors and fire extinguisher in home and teach the child to use it.
- Preferably giving internet connections can be avoided or set limits in internet usage.
- The parents can do a role play involving the child to react in emergency situations which will give them better understanding.
- Teach the child how to use the phone and train the child to call them on regular basis.
- Seek the help of the grandparents, relatives or neighbours to take care of the child.
- Display the relatives and emergency phone numbers like police, Fire, Child Helpline.
- Set ground rules in home which helps kid understand the expectations and develop self-control.
- Join the children in Day care centre until they come from job.
- Appoint a maid to take care of the children.
- Take steps to create good relationship between the siblings and support each other.
- Instruct the elder one to take care of the younger one without sibling rivalry.
- Make the child to realise that you work for the welfare of them.
- Instruct the children to tell callers that the parents are “busy” rather than to indicate that they are alone.
- Set limits in using kitchens to prevents hazards.
- Engage the child in extracurricular classes after school hours according to the interest of the student like dance, music.
- Encourage the child to get involved in self recreational activities like listening to music, painting, drawing etc.
- Grow a pet like dog, cat which may provide play partner for the kid.
- Spent time with the child and motivate the child to ventilate his/her emotions freely.
- Plan for weekend outings with the child.
- Be cautious to emotional and behavioural change in your children.
- Be honest to the children and praise for desirable behaviour and attitudes.
- Fix CCTV in home and do continuous surveillance of the kids even in work.
- Do child safety measures in home and prepare a first aid kit.
- Motivate the child to complete the homework utilising that time.

Conclusion

Latchkey children are unavoidable since there is a need for both the parents to work. It has become mandatory to go for job to meet the high cost of living. Parents cannot avoid leaving the child alone because of many circumstances but precautionary steps can be taken to limit the physical injuries, behavioural and emotional problems among them. Parents should also realise that they work for the welfare of the child so the kids’ wellbeing should be their primary concern. Parents should make the child to understand their family situations and guide them to cooperate with them.

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