

Latchkey Children

By Mrs. Lo Gallo, School Psychologist

Latchkey children are youngsters between the ages of 5 and 13 who, at some time during the weekday, are regularly unsupervised by someone over the age of 14. To working parents, preschool and after school care is a significant problem. If your child is alone at home regularly at some time during the day some of the following guidelines, depending on the age of your child, may be useful:

- Remove fire hazards and install smoke detectors.
- Post and familiarize children with emergency phone numbers.
- Teach children not to display house keys or let a stranger at the door or on the phone know they are alone.
- Discuss what to do if a child loses a key.
- Try to call home at specified times.
- Encourage your child to discuss feelings about being alone.
- Return home at a regular time, if possible, but if you're going to be late call and explain.
- Provide at-home projects and materials for children.
- Arrange some after-school activities such as 4-H, sports, or scouts.
- Practice using the phone so your child will know how to use it and what to say.
- Prepare a "Safety Kit" for your child to provide for emergencies away from home.
- The kit may include an identification card, a list of "help" phone numbers, and the correct change for several phone calls.
- You and your family should create a "magic" or "secret code" word - something funny or unusual that the child will find easy to remember. Only you, your family, and the person you have given permission to pick up your child should know the word. If a person ever tells the child to go with them the child says, "What's the magic word?" If the person doesn't know it, the child will know not to go with the person.
- Occasionally play "what would you do if" when your child seems concerned with a possible

situation.

- Be sure your child knows how to reach you and discuss the guidelines for such a call.
- Set telephone rules with your child ahead of time. Decide on how many calls a child may make, who they may call, and how long they may talk.
- Establish ahead of time which chores your child is expected to complete while home alone. If your child needs to use an appliance, be sure to give specific lessons first.
- Make sure the child knows where to find bandages, antiseptic, a flashlight, and other emergency household items.
- Establish guidelines regarding the visitation of friends, use of the stove, playing outside, etc.
- Provide healthy snacks and breakfasts for the child to prepare. Try not to have junk food in the house.