

## **Happily home alone Maybe being a latchkey child is not so bad**

Joe and Celia Johnson are home alone every day after school. They have a snack, then start on their homework. Joe may take a stress break and play a computer game or practice his oboe.

They don't answer the door unless it's someone they know. They take phone messages after telling callers their parents "are not available." The only heat-producing appliances they use are the parent-approved microwave and toaster. There's no TV until their school assignments are done. And even then, they abide by two basic rules as they understand them: "Don't overdo it," Joe said. And from Celia: "Watch, you know, appropriate stuff."

Sound too good to be true?

Joe, 14, and Celia, 11, have dutifully followed their ritual - and rules - for about a year, ever since their mother, Kris, opened an arts shop just a few blocks from their home in Crystal. Their father, Pat, is a city official. (The family's last name has been changed in this article to protect their privacy.)

The youngsters' sense of security and responsibility stems from years of preparation. It began with Kris' 10-minute absences to run for groceries; proceeded with ever-more specific instructions as the absences grew in length; and most recently expanded to an hour home alone after school - that always starts with a check-in call to their mother.

"They're grounded kids, and we think they know how to make good decisions," Pat Johnson said.

These youngsters are the flip side of "latchkey" terrors raised by two studies last fall. The U.S. Census Bureau calculated that 7 million U.S. children ages 5 to 14 are regularly without supervision after school. And the Urban Institute, a nonprofit research agency in Washington, showed Minnesota with the highest rate of latchkey children among 12 states it examined.

Research is clear that latchkey arrangements can be detrimental. Overall, these children have more social and academic problems; they're more likely to hang out with a bad crowd, and pick up bad habits such as smoking. They watch more TV. And they're alone in the late afternoon when figures show there's a peak in juvenile crime and teen pregnancy.

But now researchers are dissecting the years of studies behind those broad - and depressing - numbers. And they're finding that many youngsters - like Joe and Celia - do not suffer, and that in fact they learn important growing-up lessons when the arrangement is handled well.

It's time to pull these parents back from their paroxysms of guilt, some have concluded.

"We cannot give 'self-care,' should not give self-care, a big check mark as A-OK, nor a big red X as horrible," said Deborah Vandell, a University of Wisconsin researcher who's doing some of the dissecting.

"The answer is, 'It depends,' " Vandell said. "What's really called for is good parental judgment and careful monitoring."

Looking deeper

She cites these distinctions from her research:

- Urban grade-school children (in Washington, D.C.) in self-care felt more frightened and alone than did supervised children. Rural youngsters in self-care did not.
- Low-income grade-school children in self-care had more trouble, as measured by behavior problems, than did supervised children. Middle-class children in self-care did not.
- Behavior problems in sixth-grade children were highest for those who already had behavior problems in kindergarten and who had lots of unsupervised time as early as first grade.
- Grade-school children whose parents had an "authoritative" style - warm and supportive, but conscientious in their monitoring and firm in their expectations - were doing as well as supervised youngsters. Children with very tough or very permissive parents were more susceptible to harmful peer pressure.

"There is growing evidence that after-school programs are more beneficial for children from low-income families and for children who live in high-crime neighborhoods than for children in suburban neighborhoods and middle-income families," Vandell said.

"When the time is short, the neighborhood safe, the child mature and the family rules clear," she said, "staying home alone after school can be a good thing."

To worry or not

Several child-care providers said they still worry about regularly sending youngsters under high school age to an empty house. It's asking a lot to expect youngsters to handle whatever comes up, they said. They'd benefit from enrichment programs. Also, youngsters have said in several surveys that they crave more time and attention from adults.

But Sandra Hofferth, a sociologist at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, finds some benefit to children being alone - if not for too long.

First, she raises the question of home alone vs. what? "Not all after-school programs are enrichment," Hofferth said. "Most are merely custodial."

And while it's true that children home alone watch more TV, she said, odds are that they're also more likely to read more books.

"Children just don't read for pleasure anywhere but home," she said.

Also, she's concerned that without some free time - outside of adult-run activities - children may not learn to entertain themselves.

Laurie Ollhoff, educational coordinator for the Department of School-Age Care at Concordia University in St. Paul, said she wishes businesses and volunteer agencies would set up apprenticeships for high school students, to keep them occupied after school.

But Ollhoff agreed with other child-care experts that parents should gradually prepare their youngsters to be self-reliant - long before packing them off to college.

The first step, she said, is to have young children practice taking care of themselves with a parent present. Her 7-year-old son, for example, can make macaroni and cheese while she's there.

"And families need to talk about, 'We're doing this because someday you're going to have to do this without me there,'" she said.

As children get older, she said, parents can move on to the 10-minute grocery run, and gradually stretch the time as things go well and the child feels comfortable.

Also crucial is the richness of the rest of a child's life, several researchers said.

Joe takes oboe lessons; both he and Celia take piano lessons. Joe plays baseball - his dad coaches - and Celia plays basketball - dad is assistant coach for her team. They both have roles in their school's upcoming musical, "Annie Warbucks."

With all that, Joe and Celia both said, they like their hour alone every school day. "I just like some quiet time," Celia said. "If I have to go 'til 5 o'clock every single day, that's too much."

Also, their parents are attentive to the youngsters' gradations in comfort levels. Celia feels fine home alone after school, she said, but not in the dark of night. So that will wait until she's ready.

As for careful monitoring, these parents have a comfort factor now rare in big cities: Kris' shop is only eight blocks from home; Pat's office is just six.

All the arrangements are part of Pat and Kris' fundamental goal for their children. "You work to raise children to adults who can make good decisions," Pat said. "You work on building them into good people."