



Should Middle Grades Students Be Left Alone After School?

Students who spend more than just a few hours unsupervised after school display feelings and behaviors that lower their sense of well-being and that could lead them to poor choices and additional high-risk behaviors.

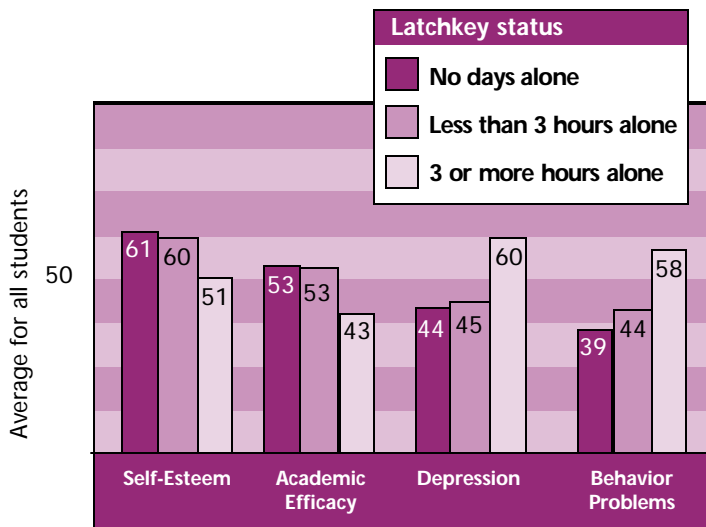
An important issue affecting young adolescents, educators, parents, and communities is the increasing number of 10 to 15 year olds who spend time alone after school. This growing number of unsupervised or “latchkey children” has resulted from changes in the economy, family structures, labor force, and other related factors. While schools and communities have a long-standing history of creating high-quality after-school programs for elementary school children, the community response to young adolescents has too often been to ignore their needs because they are not clearly understood (Kerewsky & Lefstein, 1982). Of the more than 17,000 organizations that offer community-based youth programs during non-school hours, only 29% of young adolescents are reached with these programs (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995).

Clearly, the need for after-school programs depends upon how the population in need is defined. Most youth development advocates would argue for a universal approach where all

youth ages 5 to 17 should have after-school programs available to them (Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2002). Several studies have demonstrated the adverse effects of latchkey by showing that young adolescents who spend time alone after school were more likely to enter into high-risk behaviors like alcohol and drug use than students who do not spend time alone (Mulhall, Stone, & Stone, 1996; Richardson et al., 1989; Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2002). Further research has found that numerous childhood and youth problems ranging from school failure to drug abuse to teen pregnancy can be prevented by high quality after-school programs (Belle, 1999).

An alternative way to view the issue is to also consider the opportunities that are lost when young adolescents spend time alone after school (Lipsitz, 1986). One study found that high-achieving students spend a minimum of 20 hours per week engaged in constructive formal and informal learning apart from school (Clark,

Figure 1
Student Reports of Adjustment by Latchkey Status



Note: These scores are standardized. National Self-Study average = 50, standard deviation = 10.

1990). In *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), one of the seven recommendations for middle grades reform is to involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development. Jackson and Davis stated that after-school programs are increasingly looked upon as a way to both enrich the educational experiences of students and prevent young adolescents from engaging in unhealthy or dangerous behavior.

This article will examine the latchkey status of young adolescents and its effect on their well-being. Our goal is to further strengthen the case that young adolescents need a supportive after-school environment supervised by adults to develop and grow to their full potential.

CPRD Self-Study

The Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois has been working with middle level schools throughout the country for more than a decade using a self-study process. The *School Improvement Self-Study* is a data collection system consisting of surveys completed by teachers, students, principals, and parents. It is intended to assist schools in their school improvement efforts by providing data concerning school characteristics, educational practices, and personal background and experiences in middle level schools (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Middle Start,

2001; National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2001). The Self-Study provides data to schools for needs assessment, goal setting, program planning, implementation, and data-based decision making for school improvement. Self-Study data are also linked to local and state achievement scores to ascertain academic gains and to understand the relationships between student and school factors and standardized achievement scores.

The data presented here are from a large sample of more than 121,000 students attending 287 middle grade schools in Arkansas (59 schools), Louisiana (51), Michigan (127), and Mississippi (50) during 2000-01. The middle grade schools in this sample are located in large and small urban areas, suburban areas, and small town or rural communities. In addition, 92% of these students are in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade, 48% report receiving a free/reduced lunch and 40% identify themselves as an ethnic minority (e.g., black/African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, multicultural). These schools participated in the Self-Study as part of the Michigan and Mid South Middle Start Initiatives under the direction and leadership of the Michigan Middle Start Partnership and the Foundation for the Mid South, and funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

Analysis

This analysis of student latchkey status is derived from student responses to the Self-Study about the number of days per week and hours per day they report being home alone after school, without adult supervision. Based on the responses to these survey questions, three categories of latchkey status were constructed: *no days home alone* after school (21% of students), *home alone for less than three hours* for any number of days (54%), and *home alone for three hours or more* (25%). The focus of the latchkey categories is on the number of hours rather than the number of days alone. CPRD's prior research found that children are most affected by the duration of their time alone rather than the number of days per week that it occurs (Mertens & Flowers, 1998).

The student outcomes addressed in this analysis include four scales measuring varying attributes of student adjustment or well-being. They include student reports of self-esteem, academic efficacy, depression, and behavior problems. Each of these valid and reliable scales is comprised of multiple

questions used to measure responses of students within a school. These measures of student adjustment are reported as standardized scores. We have used a sample of more than 750,000 students that have participated in the Self-Study since 1994 to calculate a national standard (represented by a score of 50) for each of the four scales. Ideally, when educators look at this type of data they would want their students to report high levels of self-esteem and academic efficacy (above 50) and low scores for depression and behavior problems (below 50).

Findings

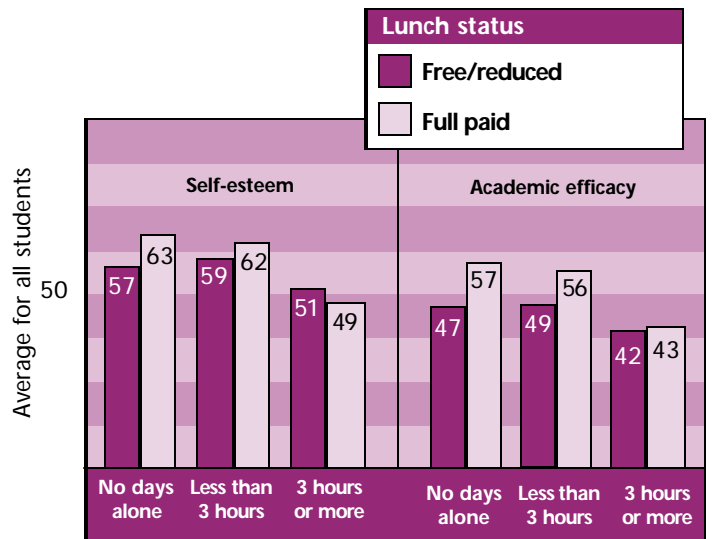
Figure 1 depicts student adjustment scores for self-esteem, academic efficacy, depression, and behavior problems by latchkey status. There are two significant findings that emerge from this analysis. First, the adjustment scores for students reporting *no days home alone* and those reporting *less than three hours home alone* are quite similar to one another. The scores for self-esteem (61 vs. 60), academic efficacy (53 vs. 53), and depression (44 vs. 45) are nearly identical and the scores for behavior problems only differ by five points (39 vs. 44). This is an important finding because it provides evidence to support the fact that students can be left home alone for shorter periods of time (i.e., less than three hours per day) and their adjustment scores are nearly identical to those of students that spend no time home alone after school.

The second finding is that students who are *home alone for three hours or more* report the lowest levels of self-esteem and academic efficacy and the highest levels of depression and behavior problems. For the depression scale, these students' scores were ten points higher (60) than the national Self-Study average, and eight points higher for behavior problems (58). The conclusion is obvious—students *home alone for three hours or more* after school are less well adjusted compared to students either *not home alone* or *home alone for less than three hours*.

Is poverty a factor?

Now that we have examined the effect of latchkey status on student adjustment outcomes, what effect does poverty (assessed here by free/reduced vs. full paid lunch status) have on these scores? Are the results observed in Figure 1 more of a problem for at-risk students (i.e., free/reduced lunch students) or

Figure 2
Self-Esteem and Academic Efficacy by Latchkey and Lunch Status



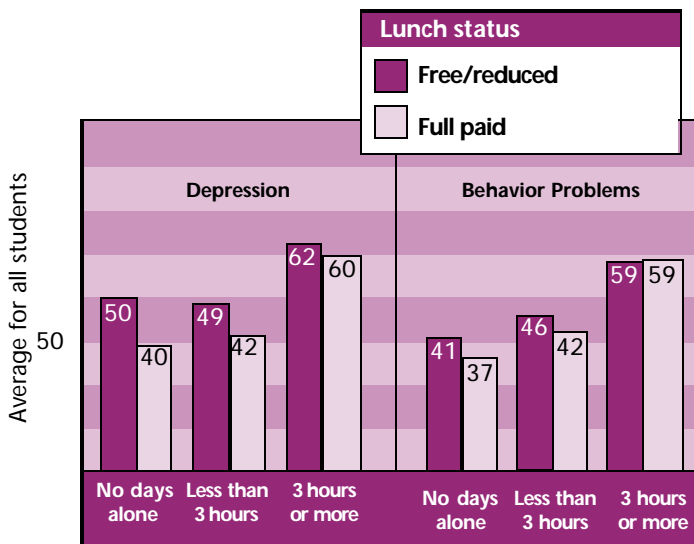
Note: These scores are standardized. National Self-Study average = 50, standard deviation = 10.

does latchkey status have an impact on all students? Figures 2 and 3 present the adjustment data by latchkey and lunch status. Here we can observe several interesting findings.

First, the overall pattern observed in Figure 1 appears to be the same. Regardless of lunch status, students reporting *no days home alone* or *less than three hours home alone* report the highest levels of self-esteem and academic efficacy and the lowest levels of depression and behavior problems. Further, students spending *three hours or more alone* report lower levels of self-esteem and academic efficacy and higher levels of depression and behavior problems.

Second, there are some differences in adjustment by lunch status. The differences, however, occur between only two of the latchkey groups: *no days home alone* and *less than three hours home alone*. Among these two latchkey groups, the overall pattern is that full paid lunch students have more positive adjustment than free/reduced lunch students. For example, if we examine academic efficacy for the students who spend *no days home alone* and *less than three hours home alone*, we find that there is a 10-point difference (47 vs. 57) by lunch status for the *no days home alone* group and a 7-point difference (49 vs. 56) for the *less than three hours* group. In both cases, the full paid lunch students have higher academic efficacy. However, regardless of lunch status, the *not home alone* group and the *home alone for less*

Figure 3
 Depression and Behavior Problems by Latchkey and Lunch Status



Note: These scores are standardized. National Self-Study average = 50, standard deviation = 10.

than three hours group still have higher scores for academic efficacy than either lunch category for the three hours or more group.

The third finding is that the differences in adjustment for students in the *three hours or more group* are minimal by lunch status. The largest difference with this latchkey group is only two points and occurs for self-esteem and depression (Figures 2 & 3). This is particularly important since it serves to demonstrate that the problems attributed to students spending at least three hours home alone affect both free/reduced lunch students and full paid lunch students. Their adjustment scores are nearly identical by lunch status and overall they have the lowest levels of self-esteem and academic efficacy and the highest levels of depression and behavior problems. This finding alone supports the addition of after-school programs in middle grades schools.

The latchkey findings observed for the Middle Start students in 2000-01 are very similar to results obtained in both 1996-97 and 1998-99. Analysis of Michigan Middle Start schools in 1996-97 and for all Middle Start schools in 1998-99 produced nearly identical results overall and also by lunch status. The Self-Study adjustment scales have remained relatively unchanged since 1994, with only slight modifications to the self-esteem scale. The longitudinal nature of these data will permit CPRD to continue to

study the effect of latchkey status on different types of middle grades schools.

Conclusion

This analysis of latchkey and student adjustment data has highlighted several important findings. Overall, students at home after school for *less than three hours* report similar adjustment scores as students *not home alone* after school. These data provide some evidence to suggest that parents can leave their middle grades child home alone for short periods of time without exposing them to unnecessary risks.

Adjustment problems are much more of an issue for students left home alone after school for *three hours or more*. These students reported much higher levels of depression and behavior problems and lower levels of self-esteem and academic efficacy. While it is not possible to directly link these data to student achievement scores (on standardized tests), we believe that if students report relatively low levels of self-esteem and academic efficacy and high levels of depression and behavior problems, then they are less likely to perform well on achievement tests.

When we examined the effects of latchkey combined with lunch status on student adjustment we found that lunch status was not a significant determining factor for students home alone for three or more hours. The data presented here showed that students that were left home alone for *three hours or more* had less positive adjustment scores, regardless of lunch status. In fact, free/reduced lunch students and full paid lunch students who are home alone for *three hours or more* reported nearly identical scores for all the adjustment scales. This would indicate that the latchkey problem is not solely a problem for "at-risk" students; it affects all students equally.

These data provide a convincing case that young adolescents are in need of after-school programs. Clearly students who spend more than just a few hours unsupervised after school display feelings and behaviors that lower their sense of well-being and that could lead them to poor choices and additional high-risk behaviors. The challenge is for the programs to be tailored to the developmental needs of young adolescents and thus balance the autonomy that young adolescents crave with adult supervision and guidance.

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