Family Education in the Workplace: A Prevention Program for Working Parents and School-age Children


Many school-age children from diverse backgrounds take care of themselves before or after school while their parents are away from home. Research on the nature of the self-care situation as well as the characteristics of the children who are most affected has grown considerably. Recent studies conclude that understanding and addressing the unique aspects of each self-care situation is more important than debating whether or not self-care, as a distinct entity, has a positive or negative affect on children. This paper describes a new workplace-based prevention program for families with children home alone. Through a series of six workshops, the program helps parents determine if their children are ready to be on their own and, if so, how they can best prepare. Using activities which are based on methods of prevention technology, the program teaches parents and children about family communication, safety in the home and neighborhood, decision-making and substance abuse.

KEY WORDS: Self-care; education; workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Today, many school-age children from diverse backgrounds take care of themselves before or after school while their parent(s) are away from home. According to the U.S. Census (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1987), approximately 2.1 million children between the ages of 5 and 13 are considered to be “latchkey children.” This estimate, which many feel is

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conservative, nevertheless indicates a significant number of children who may or may not be adequately supervised during a critical stage in their development. Seligson, Fresh, Marshall and Marx (1990) report that the majority of parents use a self-care arrangement simply because they lack alternatives, not because they prefer it. However, many parents choose self-care because it suits their children's needs, especially as affordable, quality daycare is not readily available. In addition, they may feel that their children are fully capable and responsible enough to care for themselves (Colan, 1992).

Thus, in order to respond to the needs of this population, child advocates need to promote new programs and research addressing the impact of self-care, as well as focus their efforts on developing prevention programs for families to prepare them for self-care situations. Prevention initiatives are pro-active programs which target groups of at-risk but, as yet, unaffected people to "modify, avoid or eliminate harmful stressors and promote stress resistant capabilities" (Albee & Gullotta, 1986, p. 209).

The following paper reviews what is currently known about children in self-care, and describes a new workplace-based prevention program for working parents and their school-age children.

IMPACT OF SELF-CARE ON CHILDREN

Initial research on self-care produced contradictory findings. For example, some studies found children in self-care to be more fearful (Long & Long, 1982c), confined and isolated (Long & Long, 1983a), and to have lower school achievement, test scores, and self-concepts in comparison to children in supervised care (Woods, 1972). Concurrently, other studies found that children in self-care have similar levels of social adjustment and academic achievement as those in supervised care (Vandell & Corasaniti, 1985; Gold & Andres, 1978a; 1978b; Galambos & Garabino, 1983). These contradictory findings have led to confusion regarding the extent to which children in self-care are at risk for developing social, emotional, and behavioral problems.

Several explanations have been offered for these contrasting findings. In a review of the literature, Robinson, Rodman and Coleman (1987) cite methodological deficiencies in many latchkey studies. Some studies were seen as vague in design, lacking in methodological rigor, and offering unsupported conclusions (Robinson et al., 1987). In addition, confounding factors, such as the nature of the home environment, parental work status, and the quality of the parent-child relationship, often make the isolated effects of self-care less clear. Finally, Rodman reports that the lack of a