

Impact of the 4-H After School Curriculum on Latch-key Children

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ABSTRACT

Every day thousands of American children are left at home without adult supervision. Many working American parents cannot afford supervised day care. Their children, known as "latch-key children", often make poor use of their time after school. An early-morning variation of the "4-H After School Curriculum" was used to teach these children how to more effectively use their unsupervised time. Fifteen Cleburne Independent School District students participated in this project while attending Cleburne Community Education's Super Summer School. Ten 4-H members presented the curriculum over a 2-week period. A pre-event survey focusing on after-school supervision was given to the children in June 1992. In December 1992, a personal interview of a portion of the participants showed that none of the participants questioned had changed the way they used unsupervised time after school. However, 83% had changed their overall (supervised and unsupervised) snacking habits.

Care for school-age children is a national problem that affects more and more families each year. The increasing numbers of women in the work force, single parent families and dual wage earner families have resulted in a growing demand for child care for school-age children. Many young children are left unsupervised for extended periods of time because of the lack of caretakers, high costs, and changes in traditional family support structures. Children that are left alone for regular periods of time while their parents work are known as "latch-key" children. It is difficult to obtain an accurate count of latch-key children in Texas. The Texas Department of Human Services reports that 435,000 latch-key children is a conservative estimate of the number of children left alone daily in the state (TDHS, 1989). Nationally, the estimates range between 2 million and 15 million latch-key children. However, there are thousands of other "supervised" school-age children who are considered to be involved in activities that are not appropriate for their age and interest (Baker, 1990). Totals are sometimes underestimated because some parents feel guilty about leaving children unsupervised and consequently do not openly admit it. Others fear that children will be in danger if their latch-key status is known. Whether or not an exact count of latch-key children can be made, experts agree that we can expect the number of school-age children needing care to increase (Coolsen et al., 1985).

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THE LATCH-KEY SITUATION

There are several causes of the current latch-key situation. Single parent families, dual-working parents, and the large number of women now in their child bearing years, especially those in their 30s and 40s, who postponed marriage and childbirth (Calvi et al., 1989). Researchers indicate that families are now smaller and people are having fewer children. They also point out that grandparents are less likely to live with or near the family and in many cases are still in the work force themselves (EPC, 1982). These trends will affect the types of child care arrangements available to the modern family. Having fewer children who are spaced closer together reduces the likelihood of older children caring for siblings. Families are less likely to have other relatives living in the home to provide care. Smaller families also indicate mothers are more likely to be included in the work force (Calvi et al., 1989). The greatest change taking place in the structure of American households is the increase in the proportion of families supported by women. This can be attributed to increases in divorce rates, to increases in birth rates for unmarried women, and to the tendency for single mothers to set up their own home rather than to live with relatives. Today, over half of the mothers with children between the ages of 6 and 17 are working. According to the United States Department of Labor (Bureau of Labor Statistics, Southwest Regional Office, Austin, TX), these trends are expected to increase throughout the decade of the 1990s. There are several other factors contributing to the latch-key situation in America. Affordability is the most significant one. The ability or inability to pay for organized child care influences the decision of many parents to leave their children unattended. After shelter, food and taxes, child care is the fourth largest expense for families today. Many families spend more than 20% of their gross income for child care expenses (Calvi et al., 1989). The effects of unsupervised children are significant. Studies at major corporations have shown that the instability and poor quality of child care is one of the most significant predictors of ill health and stress of men and women with children (Calvi et al., 1989). Parents often experience increased worry and stress regarding their children who are supposed to be getting themselves to the proper location after school has been dismissed. This stress-related problem causes parents to perform less efficiently at work. Parents feel guilty because they cannot be at home with their children. The children will, of course, sense the stress felt by their parents. Communities are also affected by the problem of latch-key children. There will be more situations involving drug abuse, skipping school, vandalism, deliberately or accidentally set fires, and other home-related accidents. Students are also unprepared in class because of the lost preparation time after school. These children are experiencing academic failure. The Texas Agricultural Extension Service has addressed this problem by writing and implementing the 4-H After School Curriculum. This curriculum was established for school systems to use in after school programs. The package includes information on establishing the project, recruiting volunteers, staffing and business decisions. The lesson plans are 20 minutes in length and include a list of all materials needed and the approximate cost. The 4-H After School Curriculum was piloted in several counties throughout the state. Through these pilot counties, the curriculum was tested and a final copy of the curriculum was written and distributed to the counties across the state.

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness and impact that the 4-H After School Curriculum had on students in relation to their unsupervised time spent after school and on their snacking habits. To determine the effectiveness of the program, the students were issued a pre-event survey and were asked questions in relation to their unsupervised time at home. A post-event survey was issued to determine if the children had used the material presented.

The eastern section of the Cleburne Independent School District is made up mostly of low income families where a great number of children are left alone while their parents work. This community had the potential to be strengthened by implementation of the 4-H After School Curriculum. In May 1992, Cleburne Community Education requested assistance with a summer project. Community Education was trying to establish Super Summer School, a summer program that the school children could elect to attend. Super Summer School would be held for 2 weeks during June. Classes would be offered in the sciences, computers, physical fitness, and other topics that would be interesting to children. The classes would begin at 9:30 a.m. and end at 3:00 p.m. The Super Summer School idea was well received by the community. A problem arose in that parents needed to drop their children off by 8:00 a.m. on their way to work. The 4-H After School Curriculum fit this situation very well as the lesson plans would be used for an hour and a half before the other classes started.

Every two days, the children had a different volunteer staff team made up of two 4-H members. Most of the activities were well received and the children enjoyed the hands-on activities. The curriculum included a lesson plan on maps. The children did not like sitting still and drawing maps. Consequently, this turned out to be a real problem. The children were easily bored, however they expected to be entertained during their one and a half hours. Fortunately, the majority of curriculum selected by the volunteer staff was hands-on type activities. The curriculum taught the children about the state of Texas, its land and its weather. Through the weather curriculum the children were encouraged to watch the news. Each child was responsible for obtaining the weather report from the evening news. Consequently, the children began discussing other events from the area and around the world that were discussed during the news broadcast.

Using the food curriculum, the children prepared nutritious snacks during their morning workshops. The snacks were simple and could be prepared without cooking or cutting. During preparation time, nutritional aspects of the snacks and how they contribute to the child's developing body were discussed. The students' response to this curriculum was very positive.

A wildlife curriculum was also used. One particular activity made the children much more aware of plants growing in their area. A list of plants that they had to find in a field was issued. The plants were species consumed by deer. The children learned the distance deer must travel to consume their daily diet. Other curricula were related to at-home activities so that the children could use them during their unsupervised time after school.

RESULTS

Overall, the at-school portion of the project was successful, as all of the material selected was adequately presented. However, coping with the students' attitudes and lack of discipline was a problem. Disruptions were common.

There were eight male and seven female participants in the program. There were three hispanics, one black and eleven white children. They came from varied economic backgrounds. Three were from very low income families.

Question 1 of the survey was: "Do all of the adults in your house work outside of the home?" Ninety percent of the children responding to Question 1 came from families where all of the adults worked outside of the home. Question 2 asked: "If yes, who do you normally stay with?" During the summer, 40% of the children stayed at a day care facility, 40% stayed with their grandparents, and 20% stayed at home with siblings. During the school year, 70% stayed home alone after school while their parents worked. The other 30% stayed with extended family members or in a day care facility. Question 3 asked: "Do you ever stay home alone while the adults are working?" Of the 70% that stayed alone after school, the time alone ranged from 30 minutes to 4 hours. Question 4 asked: "What do you normally do during your time alone?" One hundred percent indicated watching television or talking on the phone. No one indicated that their time was spent studying or doing homework.

In December six participants along with their parents were interviewed to determine the impact that the 4-H After School Curriculum had on the children. The children were asked: (1) How do you spend your time after-school before your care giver gets home? (2) Have your snacking habits changed since Super Summer School? and (3) Do you use any of the activities you learned during Super Summer School? Of the six students interviewed, all of them still watched television and talked on the phone after school. The parents indicated that they did not object to their children sitting and watching television because it was better than being out on the streets. Five of the six children (83%) indicated that they had changed their snacking habits and ate more nutritious foods after school. The parents were asked the similar questions as they related to their child. Two of the parents indicated that while the children did not think that they used what they had learned at summer school, they had noticed the children taking greater interest in the evening news. One father indicated that his son could explain the weather patterns as a result of the material presented to him the previous summer.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

If parents or other care givers are not with children, time after school is usually spent watching television or talking on the phone. While the parents may be pleased that the children are not on the streets, grades in school fall because of unsupervised time (Coolsen et al., 1985). Latch-key children are becoming a community problem as fires and other in-home accidents occur in latch-key households. It could be less expensive for the communities to help fund programs such as these rather than spend money repairing damaged property due to vandalism, or on juvenile probation, and correcting other problems attributed to unsupervised time after school. Through

after school programs, inappropriate activities could decrease and school grades improve. Parents could be more at ease in the work place knowing that their children are being well cared for and are not engaged in activities that could harm them or others.

A future study is recommended to determine a more accurate impact on children participating in after school programs. A study with a greater number of children in an inner-city, low income neighborhood could give a better indication of the impact that the after school curriculum could have on a diverse audience. This study should be done over a 2 to 3 year period and involve parents or care givers as much as possible. If parents are involved from the start and have an interest in the program, chances of success are greater.

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