

# young families

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## Latch Key Children

Many children with working parents are unsupervised after school, during school vacations, and at other times. Careful planning and preparation can help your "latch key" child feel more secure and confident about being alone when you are away at work.

Never leave a child alone without first determining whether he or she is ready. This means anticipating situations, discussing possible reactions, and having trial runs.

If your child carries a house key, make sure it is worn on a string under a shirt or dress or pinned to the inside of a pocket or knapsack. Displaying a key alerts people that the child is alone after school. Leave a spare key with a neighbor who is usually home or have a plan (such as calling you from a nearby store) in case the child loses the key.

### Provide Adult Backup

Parents or other adults should be available by phone. A neighbor who is both willing and usually home should be designated for help in emergencies. You might consider asking a congenial elderly neighbor to telephone and visit your child while you're gone. Such cross-age contacts can be good for both parties.

Check in with your child by telephone if at all possible. Set a regular time for a check-in call. Be specific about the circumstances under which your child can call you at work.

Always tell your child when you'll be home and where you are. If plans change, call and tell the child.

### Discuss Activities and Behavior

Be specific and clear about expectations, assignments, and limits. If homework or housework chores are to be done, be sure this is understood and checked on. Also work out limits on guests, snacks, phone use, and TV viewing. Being unsupervised does not mean that children have freedom to do as they please.

Be clear about whether they can visit certain friends and where they can go out of doors. Give instructions to always call or leave a note saying where they are going.

### Contacts with Strangers

Children must be alerted to the potential dangers of contacts with other people during your absence, but try not to scare them. Here are some things to say to your child about dealing with strangers:

- "Never get into a car with a stranger or go anywhere with anyone without my specific permission." Tell the child to say "No, thank you" and walk briskly away. The child need not be rude or scared, just cautious.

- "Never tell anyone who calls on the phone that you are home alone." Have the child say, "Dad (or Mom) is busy right now. Can I take a message and have them get back to you?" Call your child on the phone and have her or him practice such lines. If someone scares the child over the phone, tell the child to hang up and call you or a neighbor or the police. Caution the child not to leave the phone off the hook or let it ring unanswered; the caller could be you.
- "Keep the door locked if someone knocks; don't let anyone in unless I have already told you it's all right." Some parents draw up a list of people to whom it's okay to open the door. The child should be alerted to any anticipated visitors, such as a service person. Be sure the child can see who is at the door, even if it means installing a peephole at the child's level. Instruct the child not to inform the person at the door that he or she is home alone. Indicate that Dad or Mom cannot come to the door right now but will get back to them if they will leave a message.
- "If you come home and find a door ajar or a window open or anything else out of order and think there is someone in the house, don't go in." In such a case, tell your child to go to a neighbor and call home first (perhaps a family member came home early). If no one answers, the child should call the parent at work or call the police.

### Safety Precautions

Give your home a safety check: are there door and window locks, smoke alarms, fire escape routes? Do your children know fire safety rules? Older children should know what to do if the power goes off, how to recognize the smell of gas and what number to call to report it, where the main water valve is in case a pipe bursts, and perhaps how to replace a fuse. Keep an operative flashlight handy — not candles.

Post a list of emergency phone numbers by the telephone — your work number, fire department, police or sheriff, emergency medical help, and at least three close friends or relatives who have agreed to be contacts.

Ronald L. Pitzer

Extension Family Life Specialist

## Visit Your Child's School

When you show an interest in parent-teacher meetings, and take time to visit your child's school, you are demonstrating to your child that you consider school to be an important place.

School visits can break down barriers between parents and teachers. A good many parents are afraid of teachers, and sometimes teachers are afraid of parents. Getting to know one another can help erase suspicions and fears.

Even a brief acquaintance with the teacher can help throw light on your child's behavior at school. You can also observe your child in relation to others, and see for yourself why your child likes or dislikes school.

By visiting your child's school, you will be better informed about what's right or wrong with the school.

Ronald L. Pitzer

Extension Family Life Specialist

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## Indoor Air Quality

Now is the time to finish "tightening up" your home to save on heating costs and to increase your family's comfort during the coming winter months. At the same time, to protect your family's health, efforts should be made to control indoor air pollution.

House tightening activities such as weatherstripping, caulking, and window sealing do not cause pollution. However, by reducing air leakage, they do allow a buildup of pollutants already in the home.

### Effects of Pollutants

Research on residential indoor air quality is relatively new. Some facts appear to be clearly established, but there are important questions that still remain to be answered. It is well known that a high-level, short-term exposure to some single pollutants, such as carbon monoxide, is a serious threat to health. But the cumulative effects of low-level, long-term exposure to many pollutants are not clear. Furthermore, pollutant levels may vary so much between different homes, and even within the same home depending on air leakage, that it is difficult to generalize about indoor air quality.

### Remove Sources of Pollution

Because of the uncertainties about the effects of some interior air pollutants, caution is advised. You can reduce the risks of indoor air pollution in two simple ways: by eliminating sources of pollution and by providing good ventilation.

Eliminating pollution sources can mean either removing those that are present or not introducing new ones into the home. A good example is smoking. By eliminating smoking in the home, you can help reduce levels of the pollutants known as RSP (respirable suspended particles) and BaP (Benzo-(a)-pyrene). The effects of these pollutants range from nose, throat, and eye irritation to lung cancer.

### Provide Good Ventilation

Carbon monoxide is a product of incomplete combustion. To reduce the risk of high levels of carbon monoxide, make sure your combustion heating equipment is examined each fall by a qualified technician. Proper venting of wood stoves and fireplaces should be checked at least once a year. Using an electrical space heater instead of an unvented kerosene heater will also reduce pollutant hazards.

Task-related ventilation can help control indoor air pollution. For cooking, an exterior ducted exhaust fan will help to reduce excessive humidity as well as nitrogen oxides produced by gas ranges. Household chemicals, including aerosol sprays and cleaning agents, should be used only in well-ventilated areas; always follow the label directions.

For more information about indoor air pollution and its effects, contact your health care provider, local utilities, low-income weatherization program, or the Energy Information Center (Twin Cities phone 296-5157 or toll-free phone 1-800-652-9747).

*William J. Angell*  
*Extension Housing Specialist*

## Kerosene Space Heaters

Kerosene heaters must be used with caution to prevent fires and indoor air pollution. Most of the newer models have safety features to reduce the risk of fires and are UL (Underwriter's Laboratories) tested to meet requirements to reduce fire hazards.

Even with safety features, there is always a potential risk due to carelessness. Here are some suggestions for the safe use of kerosene heaters. Make sure your children understand these safety rules, but do not allow them to operate the unit.

- Never allow children or pets to touch the heater.
- Never leave children alone with a heater.
- Keep the heater out of the traffic lane in your home. Keep combustibles at least three feet from the heater.
- Do not use flammable aerosol sprays or liquids such as hair sprays, deodorants, or paints near the heater.
- Equip your home with smoke detectors. Locate them in hallways and near bedroom and home exits.
- Provide ventilation in order to keep pollutant levels low. This is especially important in tightly weatherstripped homes or in small enclosed rooms.

*Wanda W. Olson*  
*Extension Specialist*  
*Household Equipment*

## Children & Money: Safety

Teaching children about money was discussed recently in *Young Families*. A reader has expressed concern about children ingesting or inhaling coins deliberately or accidentally. This can happen.

Children need instruction about not putting coins into their mouths or their playmates' mouths. Give your children supervised experiences with money before allowing them to use coins on their own. Three- or four-year-olds can purchase items if you give them coins just before the purchase.

*Dottie A. Goss, Extension Specialist*  
*Meredith K. Johnson, Administrative Fellow*  
*Family Resource Management*

## This Issue

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