



A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LATCHKEY CHILDREN REGARDING EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING, ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, COPING STRATEGIES, PARENTAL SUPERVISION, SAFETY, SELF-ESTEEM, AND PEER RELATIONSHIP AMONG 6–16 YEARS OF CHILDREN AT SELECTED AREA

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ABSTRACT

Latchkey children are increasingly common due to changing family structures and parental employment patterns. The present study aimed to assess the psychological and behavioural responses of latchkey children aged 6–16 years, with special reference to emotional well-being, academic performance, social development, coping strategies, parental supervision, safety, self-esteem, and peer relationships. A phenomenological descriptive research design was adopted. The study was conducted among 20 latchkey children selected using purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through a demographic data proforma and a semi-structured interview schedule. The findings revealed that many children experienced feelings of loneliness, fear, and anxiety during unsupervised hours, which influenced their behaviour, academic routines, and social interactions. Some children demonstrated positive adaptation through independent study habits and effective coping strategies, while others showed behavioural withdrawal and reduced peer interaction. The study highlights the importance of adequate parental supervision, emotional support, and structured after-school care to promote healthy psychological and behavioural development among latchkey children.

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

“A latchkey child is not just unlocking a door — they are unlocking early maturity.”

— Anonymous

The term 'Latchkey children' refers to children typically between the ages of 6 to 16 years, who return to an empty



home after school or remain at home with little or no parental supervision for extended periods. This situation commonly arises due to parental work commitments, single-parent households, or economic pressures that require dual-income families.

The name 'Latchkey' originates from the image of a child carrying a house key—often worn on a string around the neck—to let themselves into the home after school. Growing numbers of families today face circumstances in which children must manage after-school hours on their own. While this arrangement provides certain opportunities for growth, it may also expose children to emotional, social, behavioural, and safety-related challenges. Children who spend significant time unsupervised often report feelings such as fear, loneliness, and boredom, which may contribute to anxiety, depression, and lower levels of self-esteem. A lack of consistent adult interaction and emotional support may further intensify these outcomes.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2022), latchkey children are typically between 6 and 16 years old and are alone for 1–3 hours daily after school. While some develop maturity and independence, others face emotional stress and safety risks. Phenomenological approach is valuable in capturing the subjective experience of latchkey children. Rather than examining only statistical outcomes, this study aims to explore the lived realities, feelings, coping strategies and interpersonal relationships of children who routinely spend time without parental supervision. Ultimately, understanding latchkey experiences is essential for developing informed interventions, parental guidelines, school-based support systems, and community programs that promote children's well-being. As modern society continues to change, exploring the emotional and developmental impact of latchkey situations becomes increasingly important for researchers, educators, policymakers, and families.

NEEDS OF THE STUDY

Children who return to an empty home after school experience a unique set of emotional and social changes. Feelings such as anxiety, loneliness, fear and stress are commonly reported among latchkey children. These emotional difficulties may influence their behaviour, self-esteem and overall well-being. Understanding the coping strategies used by latchkey children is another important reason for conducting the study. Children adopt various methods such as distraction, peer support, routine building or engaging in hobbies to

deal with stress. Studying these strategies will help parents, teachers and counsellors design interventions that strengthen healthy coping and reduce emotional risks. Sethi et al. (2018) observed that latchkey children in urban India showed lower emotional well-being and weaker parent-child relationships. Similarly, Hofferth & Sandberg (2001) found that unsupervised children spent more time watching television and less time on homework, affecting academic performance. Parental supervision and communication play a crucial role. Richardson (2017) reported that children who received consistent phone communication or virtual check-ins with parents experienced lower stress and better safety awareness. Collecting personal stories and lived experiences from latchkey children is vital to uncover the unique challenges they face and the resilience they demonstrate. Their experiences provide valuable insight into how they navigate complex situations, manage responsibilities and balance academic and personal demands while being alone at home. Finally, in a rapidly changing society where dual-income households and single-parent families are becoming more common, this study is necessary to provide updated evidence for policymakers, school authorities and community organizations.

OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the emotional impact of being a latchkey child.
2. To assess the effect of latchkey situations on academic performance and social development.
3. To identify coping strategies used by latchkey children.
4. To explore parental supervision, safety, and relationship patterns among latchkey children.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was adopted for the present study to explore the lived experiences of latchkey children.

A phenomenological research design was used to explore the lived experiences of latchkey children.

Setting of the Study

The study was conducted in selected urban and semi-urban residential areas.

Population

The population of the study consisted of school-going latchkey children aged 6–16 years whose parents were employed and who stayed alone at home after school hours.

Sample

Sample Size

The sample size consisted of 20 latchkey children.

Sampling Technique



Purposive sampling technique was used to select children who met the inclusion criteria.

Criteria for Sample Selection

Inclusion Criteria

- Children aged 6–16 years
- Children staying alone at home for at least one hour after school
- Children with working parents
- Children able to communicate in Tamil or English
- Children willing to participate

Exclusion Criteria

- Children with diagnosed psychological or developmental disorders
- Children staying with caregivers or grandparents after school
- Children unwilling to participate

Tool for Data Collection

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule developed by the researcher based on literature review and objectives of the study.

Description of the Tool

The tool consisted of two parts:

Part I: Demographic variables (age, gender, class, duration of being alone, parental occupation)

Part II: Open-ended interview questions related to:

- Emotional impact
- Academic performance
- Social development
- Self-care and coping strategies
- Parental supervision, self-esteem, safety and Peer relationship

Data Collection Procedure

- Formal permission was obtained from concerned authorities.
- Informed consent was obtained from parents and assent from children.
- Individual interviews were conducted in a comfortable and safe environment.
- Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes.
- Responses were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

DISTRIBUTION OF VARIABLES

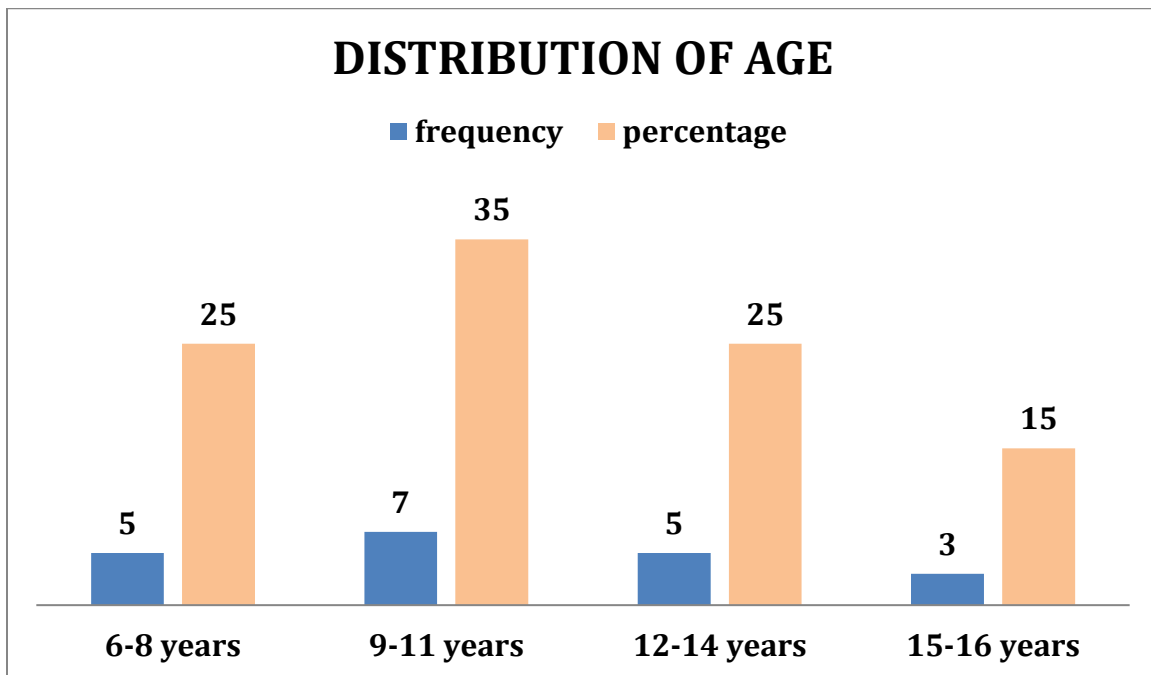


Figure 1: shows the Distribution of age



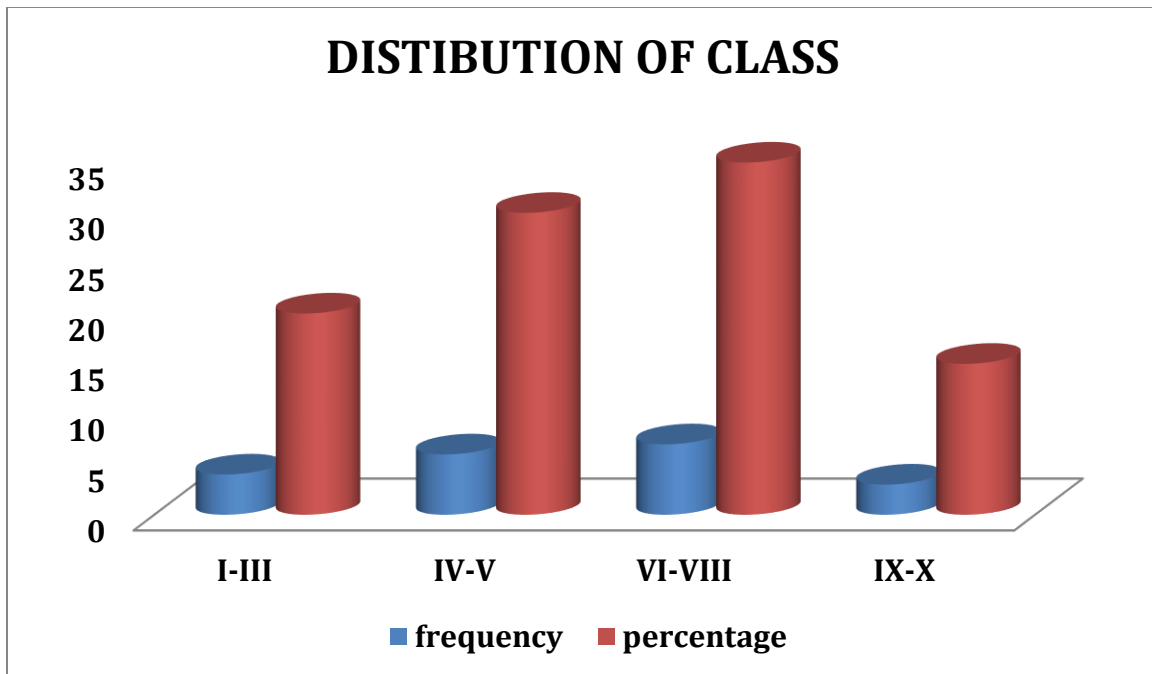


Figure 2: shows the Distribution of class

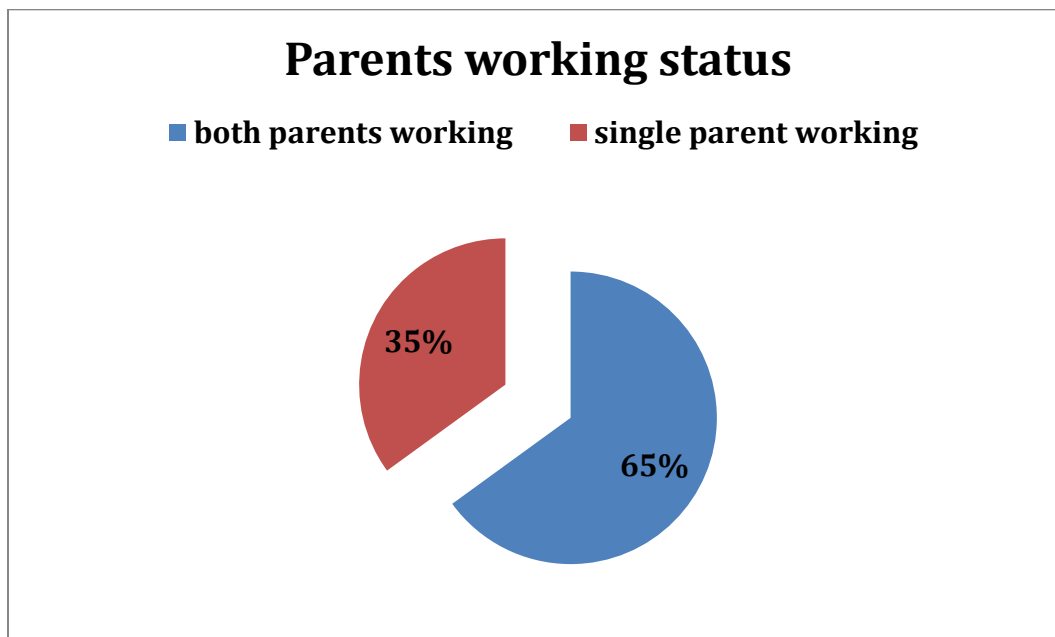


Figure 3: shows the Distribution of working status of parents

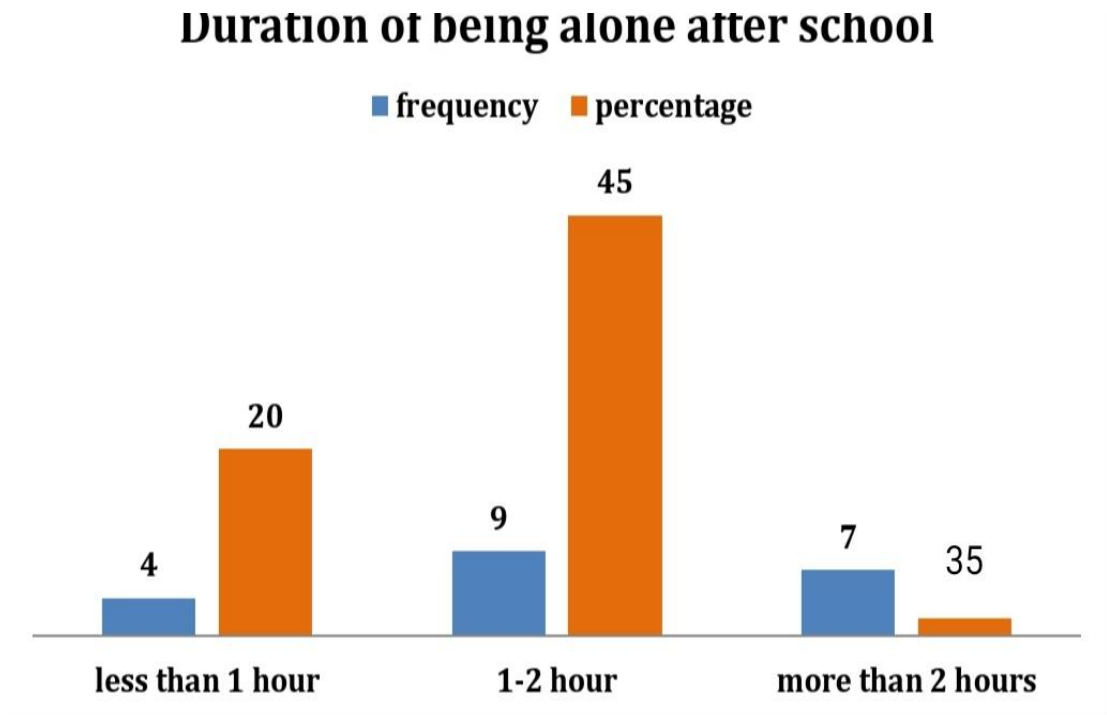


Figure 4: shows the Distribution of duration of being alone after school

Theme I: Emotional Impact of Being a Latchkey Child

This theme explains the emotional responses of children when they stayed alone at home after school hours.

Sub-theme 1.1: Feelings of Loneliness and Fear

The majority of children reported feeling lonely when they were alone at home. Fear was commonly associated with darkness, unfamiliar sounds, and strangers.

Verbatim responses:

“I felt lonely until my parents came home.”

“I was scared when it became dark.”

Sub-theme 1.2: Emotional Disturbances and Mood Changes

Many children experienced sadness, boredom, irritability, and anxiety during unsupervised periods.

Sub-theme 1.3: Sense of Safety and Support

Some children felt safe when parents regularly called or gave clear safety instructions.

Sub-theme 1.4: Impact on Academic Performance and School Adjustment

Children reported mixed effects on academics. Some completed homework independently, while others experienced difficulty concentrating.

Theme II: Academic Performance

Theme 1: Homework Completion and Study Habits

Most participants reported that being alone after school affected their regular completion of homework. Children expressed difficulty in managing time, lack of guidance, and distractions such as television and mobile phones. Some children managed independently and felt responsible. Younger children required more supervision. Older children adapted better with self-study habits. Interpretation: Latchkey situations have a mixed effect on academic performance. While some children develop independence, others experience reduced academic discipline due to lack of supervision. Theme 2: Concentration and School Adjustment: Several children expressed difficulty concentrating on studies when alone. Feelings of loneliness and boredom interfered with academic focus. Few children showed improved concentration due to quiet environment. Majority required



adult guidance for consistency. Interpretation: Latchkey conditions may negatively influence concentration and school adjustment, especially among younger children.

Section B: Social Development

Theme 3: Interaction with Family and Community

Children reported varying levels of interaction with siblings, neighbours, and relatives. Children with siblings showed better social adjustment. Those staying completely alone showed limited interaction. Interpretation: Lack of supervision may restrict opportunities for healthy social interaction, influencing social development.

Theme III: Self-Care and Coping Strategies

This theme highlights the coping strategies adopted by latchkey children to manage emotional distress.

Sub-theme 3.1: Self-Care Practices

Children practiced self-care by eating snacks, resting, playing, or engaging in hobbies.

Sub-theme 3.2: Safety Measures Followed

Most children followed safety rules such as locking doors and avoiding strangers.

Sub-theme 3.3: Sharing Experiences

Some children spoke to parents, siblings, or friends about their experiences.

Sub-theme 3.4: Coping With Loneliness and Fear

Coping strategies included watching television, calling parents, praying, and distracting themselves.

Theme IV: Parental Supervision

This theme explores whether parents or guardians supervise children during after-school hours. Interpretation: The majority of children (55%) reported having no adult supervision, 25% were supervised by relatives, and 20% by neighbours. This indicates that most children are left alone, which can influence their safety and social interactions. Verbatim statement: "I stay home alone until my parents come back. Sometimes I feel scared."

4.7 Theme II: Safety Practices Followed by Children

This theme explores how children ensure personal safety while alone at home. Interpretation: Most children reported following safety instructions from parents (90%) and locking doors/windows (80%). These measures reflect children's awareness of personal safety even in the absence of adult supervision. Verbatim statement: "I always lock the door and never talk to strangers until my parents return."

4.8 Theme III: Peer and Family Relationships

This theme explores the relationships of latchkey children with peers, siblings, and parents. Interpretation: A majority of children-maintained communication with parents (70%) and peers (60%), while 55% reported feelings of loneliness. This indicates that although peer interaction exists, parental presence is limited, affecting emotional and social experiences.

Objective I: To explore the emotional impact of being a latchkey child.

The present study revealed that the majority of the latchkey children experienced emotional challenges such as loneliness, fear, sadness, and mood disturbances when they were alone at home after school. Out of 20 children, many expressed feelings of insecurity, especially during evenings. These findings are supported by Vandivere et al. (2015), who reported that unsupervised children are at increased risk for emotional distress and anxiety. Similarly, Aizer (2016) found that lack of adult supervision after school hours contributes to emotional vulnerability among children. However, a few children in the present study reported feeling safe due to regular parental communication, indicating that emotional outcomes vary depending on parental involvement.

Objective II: To explore the effect of latchkey situations on academic performance and social development.

Latchkey situations have a mixed effect on academic performance. While some children develop independence, others experience reduced academic discipline due to lack of supervision. Several children expressed difficulty concentrating on studies when alone. Feelings of loneliness and boredom interfered with academic focus. Few children showed improved concentration due to quiet environment. Majority required adult guidance for consistency. Those staying completely alone showed limited interaction. Lack of supervision may restrict opportunities for healthy social interaction, influencing social development.



Objective III: To identify self-care practices and coping strategies adopted by latchkey children.

The present study found that latchkey children adopted various coping strategies such as watching television, playing games, calling parents, eating snacks, and following safety rules. Out of 20 children, most reported using distraction and communication as primary coping mechanisms. These findings are supported by Mahoney et al. (2014), who reported that children rely on routine activities and parental contact to manage stress during unsupervised periods. Pettit et al. (2017) also emphasized the importance of structured coping strategies in promoting emotional well-being among children. The study suggests that self-care behaviours are crucial in helping latchkey children manage emotional challenges.

Objective IV: To explore parental supervision, safety, and relationship patterns among latchkey children.

The study revealed that 55% of children had no adult supervision after school, while 25% were supervised by relatives and 20% by neighbours.

This is consistent with Vandell et al. (2015), who reported that a significant proportion of latchkey children experience unsupervised periods at home, increasing their vulnerability to emotional distress. Aizer (2016) also found that lack of parental supervision can affect emotional stability and safety awareness in children. Children who maintained communication with parents via phone reported less fear and more emotional security, highlighting the importance of parental involvement even remotely. The study indicated that most children adopted personal safety practices such as locking doors (80%), avoiding strangers (75%), and following parental instructions (90%). Pettit et al. (2017) emphasized that children develop self-protective behaviours when left alone, though these measures may not fully compensate for adult supervision. The findings suggest that parental instructions and prior training can enhance children's safety awareness and coping skills. Findings revealed that 60% of children engaged in peer play after school, 50% relied on siblings for support, and 70% communicated with parents daily. However, 55% reported feelings of loneliness, indicating that peer relationships alone may not fully mitigate the emotional challenges of being left alone. These results are supported by Galambos & Maggs (2019), who reported that social interactions with peers and family can reduce stress but cannot replace emotional support from parents. Mahoney et al. (2014) also

highlighted that strong peer and sibling support networks improve coping among latchkey children.

Integration of Findings

Parental supervision: Minimal; majority of children unsupervised

Safety: Children adopt protective measures; communication with parents is vital
Peer relationships: Supportive but not sufficient to prevent loneliness
Overall, the study demonstrates that parental involvement and guidance, combined with peer and sibling support, are essential for the emotional well-being and safety of latchkey.

Implications of the Study

Nursing Practice

- Paediatric nurses play a vital role in identifying emotional and behavioural issues among latchkey children and providing appropriate counselling and guidance to children and parents.
- Paediatric nurses can counsel parents on the importance of supervision and safety measures.

Nursing Education

- The findings can be included in nursing curricula to sensitize nursing students about the psychosocial needs of latchkey children.
- Nursing students should be trained to assess psychosocial issues in unsupervised children.
- Curriculum can include strategies to support parental guidance and peer relationship development.

Nursing Administration

- Nurse administrators can develop school and community-based programs to support working parents and children left unsupervised after school.
- Development of community programs for working parents to ensure safe after-school environments.

Nursing Research

- The study provides baseline data for further research on psychosocial issues among latchkey children and the effectiveness of supportive



interventions. And also safety interventions, peer relationships, and emotional support strategies.

Limitations of the Study

- The study was limited to a small sample size of 20 children.
- The findings cannot be generalized to all latchkey children.
- Data were based on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by recall bias.
- The study was confined to a specific geographical area.

Recommendations

For Practice

- Parents should ensure regular communication with children during after-school hours.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that being a latchkey child has both positive and negative effects on children's emotional and psychological well-being. Emotional distress, fear, and loneliness were commonly reported, particularly during unsupervised after-school hours. However, the development of independence, self-reliance, and coping skills was also evident among many children. The study concludes that latchkey situations have a significant impact on both academic performance and social development. Adequate supervision, emotional support, and structured routines are essential to minimize

- Safety education should be provided to all latchkey children.
- Encourage children to engage in supervised peer activities.

For Education

- School health programs should include sessions on emotional coping and safety for latchkey children.

For Future Research

- Similar studies can be conducted with a larger sample size.
- Quantitative studies may be undertaken to assess the severity of emotional and behavioural issues.
- Interventional studies on parental guidance, safety training, and peer support programs

negative effects. The findings highlight the importance of parental involvement, supervision, and guidance to support the overall well-being of latchkey children. Parental supervision is limited, placing children at risk for emotional distress. Safety measures adopted by children reflect awareness but cannot replace adult guidance. Peer and sibling support partially reduce loneliness, but parental communication remains essential. These findings highlight the need for structured interventions to ensure emotional security, safety, and healthy peer relationships among latchkey children.

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