

# Home Alone Before or

**S**elf-care before or after school is believed to be becoming more widespread due to increases in the number of working mothers and one-parent families. In this article 'self/sibling care' pertains to children aged 5 to 12 years who are left on their own before or after school, or who are left with a sibling aged 14 years or younger.

In the United States, the phenomenon of the 'latchkey' child is portrayed as having detrimental effects upon primary school age children and as reflecting parental neglect (Long and Long 1982a, 1982b, 1985). The high profile currently given to child neglect focuses attention on young children left alone where fear, premature sexual activity, use of alcohol or drugs, inappropriate television viewing, poorer school performance, accidents and vulnerability to child molesters are seen as possible outcomes (Dowd 1991).

Brandon (1992) describes the prevailing, but largely untested, view in the United States that outside school hours self-care arrangements are closely linked with female headed households and inner city poverty. 'School aged children who care for themselves are still perceived as children living in poor families, left isolated and neglected and part of one or more minority groups' (Brandon 1992:23). However, there is some American evidence that self-care is more common among higher income than low income families (Cain and Hofferth 1989; Brandon 1992). Carol Russell, Chief Executive of the Australian Children's Welfare Association, believes increasing child care costs are contributing to the 'home alone' phenomenon and are forcing parents to take risks with their children's security.

## Possible Explanations for Self-Care

This article examines whether or not poverty, class or minority group status predicts the use of self-care when compared with other circumstances.

The socioeconomic factors of class, occupational level and household income may be expected to play a part because formal child care is more widely used by professional, higher income parents (Millward and Matches 1995). In contrast, no-cost self/sibling care may be more common among low income families, particularly where parents lack access to alternative informal carers. If self/sibling care is a function of lack of financial resources, we would expect the less well-off families



DAVID DE VAUS AND CHRISTINE MILLWARD

**This article looks at which families use self or sibling care for primary school age children. Contrary to prevailing stereotypes, the use of self-care was not linked to minority groups, poverty or sole-parent households.**

(often sole-parent households) to make more use of self/sibling care.

Other factors that need consideration are mothers' workforce commitments, availability of alternative informal care, and the characteristics of the children in question. Of itself, the increased workforce participation of mothers may not lead to self/sibling care, but intrusiveness of work into 'family' time may do so. Mothers who work shifts, irregular hours, overtime or who attend out-of-hours meetings may have to leave their children unattended on occasions, and so may need to use self/sibling care more than mothers whose jobs are comparatively more contained and predictable.

Since informal care may not be available to many parents, self/sibling care may be a last resort for those who have no choice but to leave their young children on their own because there is no one else to look after them. For example, parents may have

no older children to mind younger siblings and no neighbours or friends available. The lack of an alternative carer in the form of the other parent could also contribute to the use of self-care in sole-parent families (Robinson et al. 1986; Cain and Hofferth 1989).

Furthermore, wider family networks may be disrupted by geographical mobility, migration or divorce, and the development of age-homogenous suburbs (Pitney 1989; Brandon 1992; Dowd 1991; Robinson et al. 1986). In some local communities, formal outside school hours care facilities may also be lacking if there is no program at the child's school or no local access to occasional care. Indeed, in the early 1990s less than 10 per cent of Australian primary school children were attending school-based programs, and only 4 per cent had family day care or centre-based care outside school hours (Millward 1996).

# After School



Picture: Andrew Chapman

very detailed child care data for individual children. We expect that the same stereotypical images of the parents most likely to leave children without proper supervision (for example, sole mothers and poor families) are as prevalent now as then. Therefore analysis is based upon 1,900 primary school children (aged 5–12) who had both parents, or the sole parent, in paid employment and whose parents took part in the study.

## Prevalence of Self/Sibling Care

In Australia, the phenomenon of self-care or care by siblings under 15 years old does not appear widespread. Of the 1,900 primary school children needing work-related before or after school hours care, only one child in six (16.2 per cent) received self-care or care by a sibling aged under 15 (Table 1). This constitutes around 7 per cent of all the primary school children in the surveyed households, since more than half of them did not need any work-related care. It is also the same figure as is quoted by United States Population Surveys for 5–13 year olds 'left unsupervised after school' (Brandon 1992). Furthermore, less than half (43.5 per cent) of those children reported to have self/sibling care relied exclusively on such arrangements. The other 56.5 per cent had self/sibling care sometimes and other forms of care (formal, informal and household care) on other occasions.

As expected, parents were far more likely to use self/sibling care for the older primary school aged children (9–12 years). Only 9 per cent of the 5–8 year olds were in self/sibling care (only 3.8 per cent were left entirely on their own), while almost a quarter (23 per cent) of the 9–12 year olds were left in self/sibling care. However, parents were only marginally more likely to leave their sons than daughters in self/sibling care (17.4 per cent compared with 14.7 per cent). Thus there appears to be a child age and level of responsibility factor in parents' decisions, but not a gender factor.

Although one in six children received some self/sibling care, the number of hours spent in this type of care was relatively modest at an average of 5.7 hours per week. Two-thirds of those experiencing this type of care did so for less than five hours per week. Of the whole sample of 1,900 children, only 1.6 per cent were in self or sibling care for more than 10 hours a week, or two hours per school day. Nevertheless, even low levels of true

**Table 1. Prevalence of work-related self/sibling care before or after school**

Type of care	%
Only self-care	6.3
Both self and sibling care	3.5
Only sibling care (sibling < 15 years old)	6.4
Only sibling care (sibling ≥ 15 years old)	2.8
Some other type of work related care	81.1
<b>Total number of children</b>	<b>1900</b>

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (1991–93), Australian Institute of Family Studies.

self-care among young children should be avoided for safety reasons.

## Who Uses Self/Sibling Care?

As the number of mothers of young children in the workforce increases, the difficulties some parents encounter finding suitable, affordable and flexible child care is a matter of concern for parents and governments alike. The important issues are, therefore, how mothers' work commitments, family structure and family network, neighbourhood resources and family socioeconomic factors shape parents' choices about work-related care for primary schoolers.

Fathers' work commitments made no difference to choice of care, but there was a clear link between the amount of paid work mothers undertook and the use of self/sibling care (Table 2). Children of mothers working full time were more likely than those of mothers working part time to use self/sibling care (20 per cent compared to 12 per cent). Where mothers worked 38 or more hours a week, 22 per cent of children used self/sibling care, compared with only 7.5 per cent with mothers working less than 15 hours a week.

While the amount of time mothers spent in paid work promoted the use of self/sibling care, the irregularity of the work hours made no difference. Self/sibling care was not used more when mothers worked irregular shifts or irregular hours, had to work overtime, or had to attend meetings out of school hours. This was probably because, as suggested by Levin-Epstein (1994), where two parents are present they can often juggle shifts and hours to enable one parent's supervision of children. This results in a large proportion of dual income families reporting they have no special child care arrangements in place. In fact, it may be easier for casual or shift workers to be at home before or after school hours than for parents locked into

Nevertheless, the use of self/sibling care may be a decision that parents make based on their judgements of what is appropriate for their children. The older the primary school child, the more likely his or her parents might be to use self or sibling care. Some parents may also emphasise independence more in boys than in girls, so might tend to use self/sibling care for boys more than for girls. Accordingly, the age and sex of children needs consideration along with possible socioeconomic explanations.

## An Australian Sample

In contemporary Australia, little has been published about self-care arrangements. For example, the 1993 Child Care Survey (ABS 1994) reported on children being left in the care of siblings (7.7 per cent of 5 to 11 year olds) but did not report separately on young children left alone. However, the Institute's Australian Living Standards Study provides an excellent data source for examining self and sibling care patterns among Australian primary school children. This national study of 4,789 family households with children was conducted between 1991–93 and collected

an inflexible 9 to 5 routine, especially if the latter are adding an hour or more of travel time to each end of their working day. Similarly, those with evening work commitments may have their spouse available to care for children, or may be able to call on other informal babysitters who may be more readily available in the evenings than during regular business hours.

Regarding family structure, self/sibling care was common in households with several children. In households with five or more children, 40 per cent were left in self/sibling care, while in single child families only 11 per cent were left in self/sibling care (Table 3). Where there were no older children, only 7.9 per cent were left in self/sibling care. Nevertheless,

couple families made less use of self/sibling care than did sole-parent families (15 per cent compared with 24 per cent) who tend to have fewer children. This could be linked to the fact that sole parents have no other adult present, rather than to the number of siblings present.

Table 3 also shows that self/sibling care was almost twice as common (24 per cent) when there was no grandparent or aunt/uncle living within a 30-minute drive as when these relatives lived nearby (only 13 per cent). Parents' relationship with members of the local community also influenced the use of self/sibling care. Mother's sense of 'belonging' in a neighbourhood was measured by a scale including items such as how many friends she

had in the neighbourhood, her level of involvement in local activities and issues, and her feeling that local people were willing to help. Mothers with a weak sense of neighbourhood belonging were nearly twice as likely as others (23 per cent compared with 13 per cent) to rely on self/sibling care (Table 3). This could be because they felt they could not ask someone to keep an eye on their children after school. Indeed, parents who knew their neighbours well enough to ask them to mind their children were less likely to use self/sibling care than those who did not know their neighbours as well (12 per cent compared with 19 per cent). In general, a lack of alternative carers seems significant in determining self/sibling care.

However, the most important finding is that self/sibling care in Australia gave no signs of being a lower class, minority group or poverty-based phenomenon. It was not more common among non-English speaking migrant families than English-speaking families (15 per cent and 16 per cent prevalence). Furthermore, it was used just as much by mothers with professional occupations as those with blue collar jobs, while parental educational level or father's occupation were not associated with the use of self/sibling care at all (Table 4).

Household income was also not related to the use of self/sibling care arrangements. Financially well-off families – relative to the Henderson Poverty Line (Whiteford 1985) – were just as likely as poorer families to use self/sibling care (Table 4). If anything, there was a slight tendency for self/sibling care to be linked to higher income. The mean gross parental income of families using self/sibling care was \$59,656 (1996–97 dollars) and \$56,609 for those who made other arrangements. This suggests that it is not only working class, poor or non-English-speaking parents who tend to leave children unattended before or after school, but that the practice is just as common, if not more so, among English-speaking, middle class, well-off parents.

### What Determines Choice of Self/Sibling Care?

While socioeconomic factors and ethnic background did not seem to make any difference to the use of self/sibling care, the older age of the child, mother's longer hours of paid work and the non-availability of older siblings, relatives or neighbours to look after children before or after school did make it more likely. Therefore, while taking into account family socioeconomic and ethnic status, the independent impacts of the associated factors upon the parent's decision to use self/sibling care were examined to see which was the most important in predicting self/sibling care.

Logistic regression analysis revealed that the single most important factor predicting self/sibling care is whether or not the child has older siblings. Children with older siblings are four times more likely to

**Table 2. Mother's and father's work commitments by use of self/sibling care**

Factor	Self-care or care by sibling < 15 yrs old		Other type of care
Father's work status:	N	%	%
Full time	1500	16	84
Part time	63	27	73
Father's mean number of hours per week	1677	46.6 hrs	46.8 hrs
* Mother's work status:			
Full time	776	20	80
Part time	970	12	88
† Mother's mean number of hours per week	1767	33.5 hrs	28.5 hrs

Note: there was some missing data on parents' hours of work.

\* Significant difference (Cramer's V = 0.11; p = .001).

† Significant difference in mean hours worked.

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (1991–93), Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

**Table 3. Number of children in the household, proximity of relatives and mother's sense of neighbourhood belonging, by use of self/sibling care**

Factor	Self-care or care by sibling < 15 yrs old		Other type of care
* Number of children in the household	N	%	%
1 child	163	11	89
2 children	848	14	86
3 children	583	15	85
4 children	228	23	77
5 or more children	78	40	60
† Proximity of relatives			
A grandmother or aunt lives within a 30-minute drive	1274	13	87
None lives this close	541	24	76
‡ Mother's sense of neighbourhood belonging			
Weak	578	23	77
Medium	613	13	87
Strong	582	13	87

\* Significant difference (Cramer's V = 0.16; p < .001).

† Significant difference (Cramer's V = 0.13; p < .001).

‡ Significant difference (Cramer's V = 0.26; p < .001).

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (1991–93) Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

**Table 4. Mother's occupation and education and family income by use of self/sibling care**

Factor	Self-care or care by sibling < 15 yrs old		Other type of care
* Mother's occupation	N	%	%
Professional/paraprofessional	627	17	83
Other white collar	901	13	87
Blue collar	306	19	81
Mother's education			
Post-secondary level	549	15	85
Secondary school	1309	16	84
Family income relative to the Poverty Line			
Below 20% of PL (Very low)	216	13	87
20–49% above PL (Low)	370	15	85
50–99% above PL (Medium)	665	17	83
100% & above (High)	543	17	83

\* Slight significant difference (Cramer's V = 0.07; p < .01).

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (1991–93), Australian Institute of Family Studies.

be left in self/sibling care than those who do not have older siblings.

The next most important factor is the age of the child, with the probability of being left 'home alone' increasing as the child gets older. For each additional year of age, a child's probability of being left alone increases by 25 per cent. This means, for example, that a 12 year old is five times more likely than a 5 year old to be left home alone and twice as likely as a 9 year old. Therefore, the parental judgement of the appropriateness of self-care or care by a sibling under 15 years appears to greatly influence their decisions.

Next, having the child's grandparents or aunt/uncle living within a 30-minute drive decreased the likelihood of self/sibling

household, the wider family and the neighbourhood in making decisions about self/sibling care for primary school children. They also show the irrelevance of socioeconomic status and minority group factors in predicting self/sibling care for Australian children.

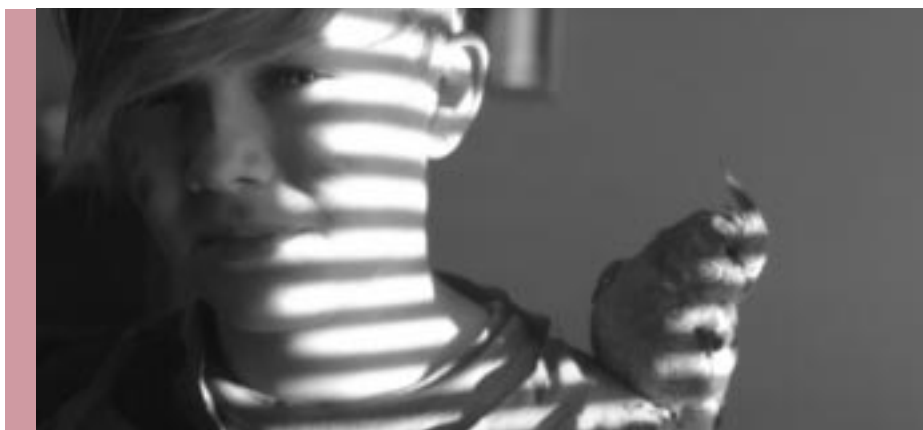
Although living in a sole-parent household can be seen as a human resources issue, it can equally be considered a measure of poverty and minority status, as has been done in the North American literature.

However, virtually none of the socioeconomic status and minority group measures were associated with the use of self/sibling care. Mothers with professional occupations were just as likely as those

Since more than half the parents who use self/sibling care arrangements use other forms of child care as well, it appears to be the child care 'of the gaps' when other people are not readily available, and formal child care is unavailable, not affordable or inconvenient. One way of helping working parents who do not have access to other informal carers to manage these short periods of before and after school care is to provide better access to school-based programs or occasional care at nearby private or community child care centres.

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Picture: Andrew Chapman

As the number of mothers of young children in the workforce increases, the difficulties some parents encounter finding suitable, affordable and flexible child care is a matter of concern for parents and governments alike.

care by more than 60 per cent, as did knowing neighbours well. This is not surprising because it demonstrates the importance of having informal carers nearby with whom the child feels comfortable.

Mothers' hours of work also had an independent, though lesser, impact on use of self/sibling care. For example, a mother who works 30 hours a week is about 20 per cent more likely than a mother who works 20 hours a week to use self/sibling care, regardless of her occupational type. Thus, mothers working more paid hours per week are more likely to need before or after school care services in their local area; (fathers' weekly hours of work did not predict choice of care).

Belonging to a sole-parent household, level of family income, coming from a non-English-speaking migrant family, or the mother's level of education did not determine use of self/sibling care. Therefore, in comparison with the other factors being considered, migrant parents, sole parents and those with lower formal education and income, are not more likely than other parents to leave children home alone before or after school.

## Conclusion

Apart from the age of the children in question, the findings show the importance of human resources within the

employed in blue collar jobs to use self/sibling care for children.

Instead of painting a picture of neglect by low income, blue collar, migrant or sole parents, the results highlight the importance of access to other informal carers for before and after school care of children aged 5-12 years. 'People' resources within and outside of the child's household are the most important factors in the self/sibling care decision. Mothers tend to use self and sibling care where older children are available in the household, or when extended family and neighbours are not available. The absence of a husband makes little difference, presumably because fathers are typically unavailable to provide before or after school hours care. The findings also highlight the need for improved access to formal care.

A picture is sometimes presented of an epidemic of neglect where huge numbers of young children are left on their own for long periods (Long and Long 1982a, 1982b, 1985). However, the results of this study suggest that in Australia the true 'home alone' phenomenon is relatively uncommon, and that the bulk of self/sibling care is for the older group of primary school children and for relatively short periods. It also suggests that migrants and parents in low socioeconomic groups should not be stigmatised as neglecting primary school children.

**Dr David de Vaus** is Head of School of Sociology and Anthropology, La Trobe University, Melbourne. Formerly he was Research Manager at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

**Christine Millward** is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.