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Youth's Window of Opportunity

The school bell rings in the afternoon and the family arrives home in the evening. This common scenario coincides with certain experts identifying what they have termed "critical hours." Where are your kids or youth in your family between the critical hours, which is commonly acknowledged as 3pm to 6pm? What are they engaged in? These are good questions for families to have satisfying answers to especially as today's society is saturated with dual parent working households. In fact, the US Census Bureau cites that 28 million school-aged children have parents that work outside of the home; and, an estimated 15 million "latch-key" kids turn the key to empty homes on most school days. The critical hours have become an increasing issue of concern because this range of time also known as after-school hours is the time slot where youth crime and risky behavior escalates.

Many studies have been conducted which yield similar findings. The bottom line conclusions are that latch-key kids have been found to be significantly more at-risk for substance abuse, teen pregnancy, accidents/injury, crime, lower grades among many others including obesity and truancy. Today's generation of parents may feel that they are facing a "rock and a hard place" dilemma: Financially providing for their children and protecting them during the time period that some law enforcers have deemed the "danger zone."

Since working at home or being a stay-at-home parent is not a feasible option for a lot of families, a family dialogue may need to begin in order to figure out just what measures can be taken to give concerned parents more of a peace of mind regarding this issue. Here are some suggestions to get the discussion started:

- **After-School Programs:** Many after school programs pride themselves in providing safe places where kids receive academic and cultural enrichment, supervision, physical exercise and have the opportunity to build leadership skills. These can be found at schools themselves as well as attached to churches, jobs and centers within the community.
- **School Activities:** There are several extra-curricular organizations and activities that meet after school. Parents could inquire with the appropriate persons at the schools regarding this (or suggest their children do it instead) and discuss this option with their children

- Volunteering: There are often opportunities that are available at animal shelters, museums, nursing homes, and others including certain seasonal efforts that present themselves within most communities.
- Work: Finding a job can also be a great way for appropriately aged youth to spend these hours and as well as earn money while, perhaps, learning the valuable lessons associated with employment.
- Skill tasks: These are endeavors that may not have the age limitations of traditional jobs such as babysitting and tutoring.
- Take up a talent: Many communities are filled with opportunities for dance lessons, karate and more. Depending on price, this may prove to be a perfect fit for families.
- Coordinating with family, neighbors, and close friends: Many families are in the same situation; thus, this may be an issue that can be worked out through networking with neighbors and friends. By the same token, many families may turn to solutions within themselves as is commonly evidenced in certain responsible individuals who join in helping relatives with watching youth.
- Old-fashion communication: Regardless if all the previous are employed, perhaps, the strongest and most accessible aid is keeping the bridge of communication open in regards to discussing the concerns that peak during these “critical hours”

Law enforcers have referred to it as the danger zone; psychologist and other experts have named it the critical hours. Perhaps, these hours that are sandwiched between when kids leave school and when parents arrive home are to be best regarded as “the window of opportunity.” What opportunities it lends itself to is where parents can help guide. Investments into these hours as well as the expanded hours during the weekend and summer can be of the greatest made in a family as well as the community in which all families reside.

For more information on this or related topics, contact Synithia Williams, Regional Extension Agent in Family and Child Development for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System at (205) 338- 9416 or email at willisl@aces.edu.

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