Educators and parents share a concern about the well being of young adolescents who are in self care (unsupervised) after school. Research I have done with colleagues at NIU suggests that parent and teacher concerns about self care are warranted – we found that time in self care was related to lower grades and more behavior problems in school for middle school students. Other researchers have found some negative effects of self care for the social, emotional and behavior development of young adolescents at home as well. Surprisingly, negative effects are more likely for middle schools students than for elementary school students.

Most middle school students are in self care occasionally and some (one-third) are in self care often. This appears to happen for two reasons. First, parents’ work schedules rarely align with school hours. Second, most after school child care arrangements (like going to a babysitter or a day care program) are for younger children and many children resist those by 4th or 5th grade.

Our findings and those of other researchers suggest some ways that parents can reduce the risks of self care. For example, we found that those young adolescents who cared for themselves some of the time after school did better in school if they also participated in a structured after-school activity like lessons, clubs or youth groups. Participating in even one supervised activity that provided opportunities for skill development was beneficial. We also found that middle school students whose parents set and enforced rules had fewer behavior problems at school. This is similar to a finding by other researchers that parents who monitored their unsupervised young adolescents from afar were more effective in reducing school behavior problems than parents who did not. Importantly, the negative effects of self care are greatest when young adolescents spend some of their time in self care hanging out with peers in unsupervised conditions.

Here are some research-supported, time-tested ways that parents can help with self care:

- Supervise your students from afar! Keep in contact with them by telephone.

- Encourage and help your child enroll in at least one structured activity after school such as lessons, a club, a youth group, or a sport.

- Establish, explain, and enforce rules about what your children do after school, where they are and who they are with:
  1. Limit your child’s time hanging out with peers while unsupervised
  2. Expect them to spend some of the time in self care doing homework or reading.
  3. Limit television time.

- Teach your child safety strategies appropriate for your home and neighborhood.

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