



by Karen Stephens

## Child Care: What's Best for Big Kids?

Work and school schedules just don't jive. Parents are at work before school opens at 8 a.m., and still there after 3 p.m. when school lets out. That adds up to an hour or two of child care every morning for school-age kids, and/or up to three hours in the afternoon. Then there are those occasional full days needed because of school holidays, breaks, and teacher institute days.

All that creates a temptation to let kids stay home alone. Resist it. In a matter of minutes, too much can go too wrong too fast. You've seen and heard the headlines. I don't have to tell you. I don't have to tell your kids, either. They watch the television news, too.

Chances are — and I'm talking statistics here — you'll be lucky and nothing really bad will happen to your kids while home alone. But danger lurks — even in good neighborhoods. Kids home alone live in frequent fear. They tell researchers that at least once a week something scares them enough to hide under a bed or in a closet. Regular fear like that shouldn't haunt kids' childhood memories.

Still, kids often lobby to stay home alone. They declare they're big kids now. When you say it's not a good idea, they ask why you don't trust them. Some shrewd school-agers pull strings by reminding you of savings on child care bills. But, that's just part of the story. School-agers have another reason for resisting child care. And it's a good one. The complaint I hear most often is: "I hate going to that baby place! They treat me like I'm a little kid!"

Yes, it's taken child care a long time to move beyond preschool design. School-age kids have been given leftover space — gyms, cafeterias, windowless basements, even vacant storage buildings — spaces that weren't designed for cozy relaxation after long days of cracking the books. In the worst cases, school-agers have been warehoused in sterile, noisy chaos until parents get off work. Why wouldn't they rather be home lying on the couch watching the tube (even if a strange, scary sound does send them diving under a bed once a week)?

But things are changing. Schools, child care centers, family child care homes, churches, charities, and some employers are putting thought (and dollars!) into creating safe and enriching child care for older kids. Parents of school-agers must search out and continually monitor suitable child care. Following are characteristics of good care for the kids who aren't so little any more:

### Staff Qualifications and Interactions

- Staff are specifically trained to work with elementary school children and can deal with their unique social, emotional, intellectual, physical, and ethical development. They respect children's need for privacy and the importance of peer relationships. They are flexible, responsive, and in tune with moods and issues school-agers face on a daily basis.
- Staff are trained in recreational programming, not just academics. They use positive discipline and teach through consistently applied consequences.

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They are skilled in coaching children on emerging ethics and conflict resolution skills, such as settling arguments without name calling and learning to fight fair through respectful debate.

- Staff genuinely appreciate the activity level, sense of humor, and characteristics of school-agers. They look for the best in kids and applaud achievement daily.
- Staff exhibit energy and interest. They interact with children and facilitate project activities, indoors or out. Staff are always near children or have them in line of sight.

#### **Group Size and Age Grouping**

- Twenty children in a group should be a maximum. The law may allow one teacher to the 20 children; but for emergencies and more individualized care, it's always best to have a least two staff per group. Add some good volunteers, all the better.
- When age ranges are wide, such as ages 5 to 12, groups are divided into subgroups. Children from kindergarten to grade 3 and those in grade 4 through grade 7 are typical subgroups.

#### **Safety and Transportation**

- Indoor and play yard equipment is geared to school-aged children's abilities.
- If offered, swimming lessons have a lifeguard on duty. Gymnastics or other specialty classes are supervised and taught by specially trained personnel.
- Protective goggles are available for woodworking and, if necessary, arts and crafts.
- Transportation vehicles are kept in good repair, insured, and driven by someone 21 years or older. A first aid kit and fire extinguisher are always on board.

#### **Self-Reliance and Industriousness**

- Self-reliance and competence are encouraged. Children are given opportunities for independent decision-making. Most activities are self-selected. Industriousness is encouraged by helping others in group projects (like murals) and contributing to classroom chores and routines (like watering plants or setting tables for snack.)
- Initiative is encouraged by letting children help plan activities, decorate the room, shop for and prepare snacks, or care for classroom pets.
- There is time and space to do homework in a quiet setting with assistance nearby.

#### **Environment**

- Space allows for rowdy and quiet activity, large group, small group, and individual play.
- There is soft, relaxing furniture, such as floor mats, couches, and bean bags chairs. Tables provide space for board or card games and jigsaw puzzles.
- Activity areas are provided on a regular or rotating basis, including spaces for writing, staging plays, sculpting clay; learning to sew, reading, conducting science experiments, woodworking, computer play, easel painting, or building with blocks. (School-agers create amazing structures!)

#### **Activities**

- Nutritious breakfast and/or afternoon snack is available when children arrive or soon after.
- Creative materials are available for arts and crafts, dance and creative movement, music activities, dramatic productions, and woodworking.
- Long-term projects are encouraged, such as making a clubhouse, establishing a newsletter, creating a band, gardening, or conducting nature or recycling projects.
- Field trips provide breaks in the routine, but are not daily events. Some trips are educational, such as a museum visit, others are just for fun like going bowling. Staff is always aware of emergency procedures and resources at field trip sites.
- There is a balance of cooperative and competitive outdoor games, such as relays, tag, obstacle course, jump rope, volley ball, badminton, jacks, and hopscotch.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.