How do children feel when they come home from school to an empty house or apartment? Do they feel lonely, abandoned, frustrated, or sad? Or do they feel responsible, trusted, independent, and mature? Or perhaps it doesn't matter that much either way?

One of the most telling insights, although unscientific, came about as an unexpected result from a survey by Sprint, a language arts magazine for fourth to sixth graders published by Scholastic, Inc. Readers were invited to write about the following theme: "Think of a situation that is scary to you. How do you handle your fear?" The editors received an overwhelming number of responses—more than 7,000 letters in total, with 5,000 of them expressing fear about being home alone, particularly after school when their parents were at work.

Other studies, carefully designed, support the conclusions suggested by the responses to Sprint. Long and Long's research shows that many children, in self-care, fear danger from strangers or other children, especially siblings. Zill's national survey also supports this, with 32% of boys and 41% of girls admitting they worry when they are alone at home; 20% of both boys and girls confessed to being afraid to play outside. However, Rodman and his team reported no significant differences between children in self-care and those under adult supervision in their study of a medium-sized city. Rodman suggests that studies showing more fear among children in self-care often lack proper comparison groups and may suffer from interviewer bias. On the other hand, Long and Long argue that their research probes deeper, allowing children to openly express their fears in a safe environment. Another explanation for the discrepancies could be the setting: children in self-care, experience varying levels of fear depending on whether they live in urban areas, small towns, or rural communities, with those in urban apartments (the focus of Long and Long's research) reporting the highest levels of fear.

Steinberg's study of 865 children in grades five, six, eight, and nine in a small midwestern city found that children's experiences after school varied widely. He categorized their after-school situations from "home with a parent, other adult, or older sibling" to "unsupervised, hanging out." He found that the less supervision the children had, the more likely they were to succumb to peer pressure, conforming to their peers instead of making their own decisions. Furthermore, parents who practice an "authoritative" parenting style—where they guide their children with love and respect but maintain control—have children who are less influenced by peers. Authoritative parenting is reflective of how God leads us: with guidance and wisdom, offering freedom in the structure of His Word and love, unlike an authoritarian or permissive approach.

The calls children in self-care make to support services offer further insight into their emotional and spiritual needs. In State College, Pennsylvania, the "PhoneFriend" service provides a helpful case study. Of the 1,370 calls received in its first year, 60% were simply children "wanting to talk" or expressing boredom. A significant 19% were categorized as "lonely," while 15% were described as "scared," "worried," or "sad or crying." These calls, rather than practical emergencies like cuts and scrapes (which only made up 4%) or home maintenance problems (3%), reflect deeper emotional and spiritual needs. Most (82%) of the responses from PhoneFriend volunteers were affective, meaning they involved listening to and reflecting the children's feelings.

In a Christian context, these statistics highlight the importance of nurturing children not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually. When children are left in self-care, their needs go beyond basic safety—they are yearning for connection, affirmation, and love and the church community should be cognizant of these needs and look for ways to connect with these children who need connection while also assisting parents who are needing to work to pay their bills. As the Scriptures remind us, we are called to be "present" for others, to show compassion and kindness (Ephesians 4:32). The absence of trusted adults can leave children feeling vulnerable and unsettled, longing for someone to provide the emotional and spiritual security that only a loving and wise Christian parent or guardian can offer. Parents should be mindful of this reality, seeking ways to foster an environment where their children can feel the safety and warmth of God's love even when they are apart from them and the church should help provide the resources to parents to assist in these areas.

Indeed, one of the significant challenges for children in self-care is not just physical safety but their emotional well-being. And for us as Christians, this underscores the importance of building up our children in faith, showing them God's constant presence, even in moments when they might feel alone.