



The After-School Lives of Children: Alone and with Others while Parents Work. Deborah Belle. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999. 197 pp.

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Deborah Belle tells the stories of families in the Boston area who are struggling to balance their children's after-school arrangements with their work lives. She richly documents how complex all these circumstances are. After reading this book, the image of the lonely "latchkey" child (a term implying children alone, neglected, and without attention after school) will be replaced by a rich set of descriptions of parents adapting and accommodating their daily routines to deal with after-school time. Parents juggle their shifts to have someone at home; bring children to work with them; *negotiate* with their children over after-school programs and try to find the best one; find aunts, grandparents, friends, and older siblings to help out with care after school; and have kids at home but call and have their kids call them frequently ("Over half of the children in the study were frequent callers or visitors to parents' workplaces . . ."). An initial category system for kinds of care was quickly dropped when the reality of variety and change became apparent. Arrangements can be summarized as "a delicate balance" with lots of "semi-supervision" on different days, constantly changing over the years. The major strength of this book is in unpackaging the term *unsupervised* and substituting what is actually lived out by families and children.

The book summarizes the literature on after-school supervision; describes parents' adaptive dilemmas; emphasizes the change and flexibility over time; and identifies stressful challenges, social relationships and supports, the well-being of children, and policy and research implications. Substantive chapters are organized around themes and topics that emerge in children's and parents' lives concerning after-school time.

All but two of the 53 families were Euro-American or African American and were intentionally recruited to include low, moderate, and middle to upper incomes. All had at least one child in elementary school and parents employed or in school full-time. The analysis pays particular attention to the low-income families in the study. Attrition was near zero (only one family lost over the four years of longitudinal study), but clearly there were unmeasured selection effects regarding which families agreed and signed up; this is not a random sample. The annual visits and interviews



with both children and parents provided rich, contextual data. Although Belle administered standardized assessment scales to mothers and children at regular intervals, these data are not reported in the book.

Belle finds that children move back and forth between more or less supervision (including many children they found who became supervised *after* periods of nonsupervision); that older children are often ready for independence and can also nurture and care for other children if given the chance; that some parents took different shifts so that someone would be home; that someone being physically present did not necessarily mean that the person was really participating in care or was emotionally or socially available to children; and—an important pattern—that older children lobbied for more freedom and were unhappy with after-school programs (and that parents often agreed with them). She emphasizes that parents are caught between difficult choices and have varied personal goals and circumstances to juggle.

Belle describes "stressful challenges": danger, fear, kids' problems with self-regulation, the nature of structure, the role of TV, conflictual relations at home, kids' handling responsibility for others, and—an interesting and important point—the search for meaning by children (*why* am I alone or not with my parents?). She has a strong development perspective in the book, emphasizing that what works best in after-school time depends heavily on the age, gender, emotional/social maturity, and temperament of the child. Girls seem to do better overall than boys.

Belle sees after-school life as part of the larger "compact between parents and children" in this society and the role of society in supporting families. She is critical of the amount and quality of much of society's support. Her policy recommendations call for more subsidized after-school programming, reviving the Lanham Act (which provided government-funded child care for children when mothers were working in World War II factories), increasing tax credits and wages for low-income families, rethinking the current school calendar (lengthening the school day and changing the long summer vacation), reducing early release days, allowing employees greater flexibility to care for their children more easily, offering older children more freedom while still in some sort of program, and giving children the chance to help care for other children and be pro-social.

The findings do not suggest any easy magic bullet solutions, however, because change and highly varied family goals and needs are the rule regarding after-school supervision. Many would favor a living wage for all families, more social investment in our schools of all kinds, better community resources for children, and so forth—just making life easier for frazzled working parents. However, the specific research



findings of this study cannot be tied easily to specific policy changes. The sample and design—and especially the absence of positive or negative school, family, or child outcome measures linked to patterns of after-school supervision—make such specific links hard to establish. The research findings do link to policy in any important way, however: they help establish a richer, more empirically and ethnographically grounded, realistic conversation with those making policy regarding what families face, what they think and do.

Belle also offers advice to parents (be authoritative, talk to your children, read about the problems, be an activist, consider your own child's readiness) and suggestions for future research: better data on what "self-care" really is; understand sibling caretaking in more depth (over one-third of kids had such care); define quality of after-school programs more clearly; understand the situations found in interviews in which parents', children's, and others' depictions of "the same" situations were different; and examine gender differences in greater depth.

The book does not provide systematic evidence showing that some kinds of after-school care always achieve well-being while others do not (barring, of course, the dangerous or pathological). Belle's point is that families'—and children's—varied circumstances and wishes should be honored, and kids and parents differ in how they respond. Although some questionnaire measures were gathered, school achievement data (or other kinds of social and affective school measures), which might have been used for this purpose, were not. The families were followed in a four-year longitudinal design, but the analysis does not take full advantage of this design to show children's and parents' trajectories and pathways over time—both individual pathways and clusters of similar ones linked to outcomes and well-being.

The After-School Lives of Children will be valuable to family and child researchers for its rich and comprehensive map of what is important in the current struggles of working parents and kids to deal with after-school hours in this society. The study comprehensively considers the many factors influencing family and child adaptation. The themes that summarize the case materials ring true in the many quotes and vignettes from parents and children. It will be a useful book for advanced undergraduates and graduates to read in courses on contemporary family life and child care.

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