

'Home Alone': Plight of Children in Indian Dual-Career Families

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Abstract

Since the latter half of the 20th century, Indian society has observed a significant increase in female labour force participation. This has given rise to 'dual-career families' even in small cities/towns of India. In such newly evolved families, children spent an appreciable 'after-school hour' not under the supervision of their parents and even in complete 'latchkey care'. Against this backdrop, the paper makes an attempt to examine the activities of school-going children in dual-career families during 'after-school hours' and discuss how working parents keep negotiated control over their children's activities. I carried the field work in Sambalpur city, situated in the western part of Odisha, India. A total of 120 school going children, aged 10 and 15 years, representing three schools were selected for this study. Interviews, participant and non-participant observations methods were used for generating data from the participants. I observed that parental employment during 'after-school hours' create abundant scope for the children to get involved in un-challenging free time activities. But such a condition often gets them involved in perilous deviant behaviours and create possibilities in risking their lives to injuries and accidents. The study also divulges that telephonic conversation and texting on a daily basis often allow 'out-of-home' working parents to intrude into the social space of their children, a phenomenon called 'negotiated parenting'. Therefore, through asserting 'authority-at-a-distance', working parents try to maintain their presence beyond their immediate domestic space. Children, on the other hand, find this process as an appealing illustration of 'negotiated compromise' where they can easily bargain with their parents without direct communication. Thus, mobile phones often play crucial role in de-traditionalizing parent-child relationship where minute habitual negotiations are understood in an analogous mode to their children who know their negotiating position very well.

Keywords: Dual-career Families; Children; After-school; Unsupervised; Self-care; Negotiation.