Too old for child care? Too young for self-care?: Negotiations between preteens and their employed parents

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Abstract

Issues of work/family conflict and child care have been addressed mainly with regard to families with young children. When children advance to middle school at age ten or eleven, families usually must make new after-school arrangements, in a context of limited options and lack of consensus about appropriate care. Based on interviews with thirty-six preteens and with forty-two of their working-class through upper-middle-class parents in a California city, this paper examines their negotiations about the after-school hours. The transition to middle school entailed an abrupt decline in school-based care resources and school-to-parent communication and emboldened most of the preteens to assert more autonomy. Some working families pieced together complicated plans for after-school coverage; others slipped into "self-care" arrangements, usually despite parents' misgivings. In analyzing ideological and structural factors that affect the negotiations, I employ the concepts *growing-up schedule* and *care reduction schedule*. Four short case studies illustrate how preteens and parents tried to speed up or slow down these schedules. Proposing the concept of an optimal *care mix*, I discuss how middle schools and their communities can become more responsive to the needs of working families.

"Hate it there, I hate it there, I hate it there! Oooh!" exclaims eleven-year-old Janna about the after-school program based at her old elementary school—a program she had attended happily in her younger years. For her single mother, who gets home from work close to 6:00 PM, that program has been a lifesaver. Although the $250/month cost has been a financial strain, the program provides care every weekday afternoon through 6:30. Janna now is starting sixth grade in a public middle school, where classes end at 2:45 PM and there is no regular after-school care program. Janna's mother sees no good alternative to sending her back to that old program, which she can attend until she turns twelve in the spring. Another mother has been enlisted to pick Janna up after school and drive her to the elementary school site, but Janna is refusing to go. "There are lots of little screaming children, and they're annoying little brats," she complains. "And it's noisy, and it gives you a headache, and they make you do stuff you don't want to do!" Janna's mother asserts just as adamantly that sixth graders are "still kids" and "too young" to be home alone in the afternoons. Her daughter, she insists, is "not going to be latchkey for a *long* time."

Janna and her mother express the parameters of a problem faced by many employed parents of preteens, defined here as ages ten to twelve. Parents who have relied on paid after-school care programs generally find that those programs are not well suited or even available for preteens. Furthermore, there usually are not enough other options for this age group, so parents find themselves facing the prospect of "home alone" time as a new or more substantial part of their child's after-school hours.

Based on seventy-eight in-depth interviews with preteens and parents in a California city, this paper addresses issues of care once children graduate from elementary school. With the transition to middle school (or junior high), material and cultural support for after-school care tends to drop off sharply. I argue that this drop-off is premature for many preteens and stressful for their employed parents.

The transition to middle school coincides roughly with the early phases of puberty. In this period, children confront a challenging array of changes—physical, psychological, social, and academic—and they benefit greatly from attention from caring adults (Carnegie Council on

Adolescent Development 1995; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1996). Nonetheless, preteens typically are lobbying parents for greater autonomy. I highlight their active role in negotiating their after-school arrangements in a context of conflicting ideas about how much care is needed.

After locating my study in relation to the burgeoning work/family literature, I introduce a conceptual framework involving "growing-up schedules," "care reduction schedules," and the "care mix" and describe further the research setting and methodology. Then I examine two views invoked in the family negotiations: that preteens are "too old" for child care and that they are "too young" to be home alone on a regular basis. I analyze how the negotiations were affected by middle-school "culture" and the kinds of care resources available. These various themes are exemplified in short case studies of how four families constructed their after-school arrangements. I conclude with suggestions for making middle schools and their communities more responsive to the needs of working families[1] and with broader observations concerning attitudes about care.

The work/family literature certainly has examined child care problems, but the research focuses mainly on younger children or incorporates preteens into a wide age span (e.g., five to twelve); thus, the care issues specific to the preteen period receive little attention. Because preteens occupy, in our social landscape, an in-between status that is neither quite child nor quite adolescent, they can fall through the cracks when it comes to addressing young people's needs. (The work of the Carnegie Council (1989, 1992, 1995) on "early adolescents" is a notable exception, although they group together ages ten to fourteen.) The very language that we use— "*child* care"—renders problematic whether preteens belong in the discussion. The alternative language of "after-school," "around-school," "out-of-school," or "school-age" care provides a partial remedy, but here too the discussion has tended to foreground *younger* children in *elementary* school. More research and analysis are needed on the issues distinctive to "*middle-school-age care.*"

Because U.S. society in general lacks meaningful rituals for marking the end of childhood, graduation from elementary school becomes the main rite of passage.[2] In the city under study, a reconfiguration of the public schools several years ago moved sixth grade out of

elementary schools to create "middle schools" of grades six through eight (replacing "junior high schools," which included only grades seven and eight). That reconfiguration reflects a national trend. The percentage of intermediate schools with the 6-7-8 pattern rose from 15% in 1981 to 55% in 1995 (National Middle School Association 1999). In effect, the new configuration pushes the end point of childhood a year earlier. Now, ten-year-olds and eleven-year-olds, graduating from fifth grade, have structural support for contending that they no longer are children and no longer require "child" care. The trend toward earlier onset of puberty reinforces precocious claims to social maturity. Conflicts with parents about being in child care may arise toward the end of elementary school but intensify with the transition to middle school.

Studies of children and adolescents suggest that those regularly on their own after school are more likely than those in after-school programs or at home with parents to develop various problems: low grades, low self-esteem, substance abuse, unwanted pregnancy, violent or criminal behavior (U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice 1998; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1996). Rather than focusing on outcomes, my research examines processes of constructing care arrangements and the feelings of family members about those arrangements.

In studying how families decide on care arrangements, I draw upon recent work in the sociology of childhood that highlights the social construction of age categories and the agency and perspectives of the children themselves (Corsaro 1997; James and Prout 1990; Moore, Sixsmith, and Knowles 1996; Qvortrup 1994; Solberg 1990; Thorne 1993). The Norwegian sociologist Solberg (1990) provides a useful discussion of parent/child negotiations, which take place "through both verbal and nonverbal exchanges, through direct interaction as well as the establishment of rules, or the adopting of positions." She emphasizes that even though parents have more power, children "do not passively adapt themselves to what their elders say and do. In everyday life . . . children have and make use of a considerable freedom of action. They are in a position to influence the outcome of the negotiating process in directions which they perceive to be favorable to themselves" (p. 127).

The literature on work and family has been predominantly adult centered and has reflected the standpoints of employed parents. Though intent on incorporating the perspectives of

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preteens, I aimed for an approach that was *interactional* and conveyed the parents' perspectives as well. To counter my adult tendency to drift back toward adult-centered thinking, I found it helpful in my writing to refer to the preteens by names (pseudonyms) but to the parents as so-and-so's mother or father.

One other underdeveloped dimension of the work/family literature to which my study contributes is the "community responsiveness perspective" (Pitt-Catsouphes, Fassler, and Googins 1998), which for my purposes I rename the "school/community responsiveness perspective." Most work/family research has focused, not surprisingly, on the job/family interface and the responsiveness of employers and spouses to challenges faced by employed parents. However, for children, the most important institution shaping their everyday lives, besides the family, is the school. The responsiveness of schools to the needs and problems of working families mediates the impact of those problems on children. In particular, when schools offer, collaborate on, or host after-school programs, they provide crucial support for employed parents and their children (Carnegie Council 1992, 1995; National Institute on Out-of-School Time 1998; U.S. Dept. of Ed. and U.S. Dept. of Justice 1998).

Indeed, public opinion strongly favors such programs (YMCA of the USA 1998). A recent national poll of registered voters (Mott Foundation 1998) found "overwhelming" support in every demographic group and across three political affiliations—Democratic, Republican, Independent—for expanding after-school programs.[3] More than nine out of ten voters wanted not only to have school-based programs in their community, but to make them available every day of the week to all children. Furthermore, a surprising 80% expressed willingness to pay higher taxes for these programs.

In this survey, the preferred location for after-school programs was the public schools. With on-site programs, parents need not contend with the transportation and safety problems of getting children to other locations. The voters surveyed recognized that schools alone cannot bear the burden of creating more programs; they wanted parents' groups, community organizations, government, churches, and businesses to share the responsibility (Mott Foundation 1998).

If schools are to serve as the focal point for these efforts, more research is needed on how families interact with schools in relation to after-school care. This paper examines the interface

of diverse working families with a middle school and its after-school offerings. Parents with early work schedules or long commutes may have before-school care problems, but here I focus on the after-school hours.

Conceptual Framework

In analyzing negotiations about "too old for child care" and "too young for self-care," I employ the concepts *growing-up schedule* and *care reduction schedule*. By growing-up schedule, I mean the pace at which children are considered to have reached new stages in the maturation process (e.g., "She's not a little kid anymore."). By care reduction schedule, I mean the pace at which young people are expected to function on their own, with progressively less parental (or other adult) assistance and supervision. To the extent that growing up is equated with needing less care, the two schedules run "in sync."

With both concepts, we can talk about *normative* schedules—i.e., what is deemed desirable by the society, community, or family—and about the *actual* schedules of a particular child. For example, for families in welfare-to-work programs, a policy that extends child care stipends through age twelve (instead of ten) conveys a normative change and also allows for a slowing down of those children's actual care reduction schedules.

Because school is such a central institution in children's lives, advancement to middle school signals strongly to all concerned that a new stage has been reached in the growing-up process. However, ideas about the level or kind of *care* appropriate for this stage are shaped by a variety of factors. People in different families, neighborhoods, communities, regions, class positions, and ethnic groups may have substantially different views (Lareau 1998; Medrich et al. 1982; Thorne in press). Parents' ideas about the care their child needs can be influenced by their job schedules and workplace cultures (Hochschild 1997). Other factors such as the gender and personality of the child—or parent—come into play as well. All in all, the issue of appropriate care for preteens is a contested matter; the lack of social consensus leaves more leeway for preteen/parent negotiations.

Although the concepts growing-up schedule and care reduction schedule facilitate discussion of the negotiations, they have the drawback of simplifying processes that are

multidimensional. Several parents articulated the complex nature of growing up when they characterized their child as mature in some ways and immature in other ways. Children of the same chronological age may differ substantially in their needs for care and supervision. Care from parents (and other adult caregivers) certainly is multidimensional, and the optimal *care mix* changes over time. In the preteen period, some dimensions of care typically become less necessary, but others take on new importance. For example, providing emotional support becomes especially significant as preteens adjust to the social environment of middle school and deal with the changes of puberty. Also, many preteens need help in developing study habits and time management skills suitable for middle school. Because the preteen/parent negotiations revolved mainly around whether or how long the child should be without adult supervision, the concept of care *reduction* serves my analysis. However, I also advocate a more complex view of a changing care *mix* as a child matures. I employ this concept in two ways: to refer to the mix of *dimensions* or *types* of care desirable at a particular stage or to refer to the mix of *providers* of care for the child.

My use of certain terminology requires explanation. I use "after-school program" as a broad category that encompasses a subset I call "after-school *care* programs" or simply "*care* programs." The distinction I intend is suggested in sixth grader Brian's account of his fifth-grade program: "It's like they're just waiting for your parents—just like they're holding you here, waiting for your parents to pick you up. It's not really activity; it's more like after-care." Actually, there *were* various activities taking place, but by now Brian feels the difference between a program designed to provide supervision *in loco parentis* and a program that exists more for the enjoyment or enrichment the activity provides. After-school activities or programs *not* designed specifically for child care rarely run every single weekday from when school ends through

6:00 PM. However, they may be *used* for child care, as part of a larger patchwork of coverage.

Another matter of terminology concerns what to call ten- to twelve-year-olds. "Preteen" is not used much in everyday conversation and defines them by their progress toward a future identity. "Early adolescent," applied usually to ages ten through fourteen, has the same problem of a teleological orientation. The word used most by the preteens themselves is "kid" (although

younger children and teenagers call themselves "kids" too). Despite its informality, "kid" provides an alternative to the preteen-contested label "child." Preteens identify also with grade-level labels (e.g., "sixth grader"), which I utilize along with "preteen" and "kid."

Finally, my frequent use of the gender-neutral term "parent" should not obscure the reality that the great majority of the parents who agreed to be interviewed about after-school arrangements were women; thus, the "parents'" viewpoints reflected here are predominantly but not entirely those of mothers. I do refer to particular individuals as mother or father and address issues of gender to some extent. However, my aim is to foreground age (generational) dynamics, which have received less attention in the work/family literature than gender dynamics.

Research Setting and Methodology

This paper derives from a larger qualitative study I am conducting with Dr. Elaine Bell Kaplan and Christopher Davidson of issues of care at the middle-school level. In the project's first phase (fall 1998 to spring 1999), we focused primarily on one public middle school ("Harper"), located in a small city in a California metropolitan area. This city has rich cultural and educational resources and a government favorable toward providing social services, but also has problems of poverty, crime, substance abuse, and gang activity.

We based our project at Harper for a few reasons. First, one of us had previous ties to the school, which helped us get our project approved. At Harper, we could explore a range of experiences because the more than seven hundred students are diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and class.[4] Furthermore, Harper recently had done an extensive self-study, as part of applying for a grant to expand services and after-school activities for "at-risk" students, and we could utilize some of their data. School staff took an interest in our research, and we became part of the school/community "collaborative" overseeing implementation of the grant, a key locus of discussion about preteens and care.

Although our principal research method was semistructured, in-depth interviews with kids and parents, we also interviewed informally some staff members running after-school activities, observed those activities, and attended school and parent meetings that addressed issues of care. Before concentrating on Harper, our team held two focus group discussions with

middle-school kids from several public and private schools in the area and found that they were dealing with similar after-school issues. In our interviews, we included a few kids and parents from other schools, but mainly we focused on Harper families.

To recruit interview subjects at Harper, we distributed to the whole student body a flyer inviting them and their parent(s) to participate, which generated a small response. We also recruited on the school grounds and at school events, most successfully at a parent-teacher conference day. Our sample is fairly diverse but, compared to the school population, overrepresents middle-class families and European American familes.

The present paper is informed by a total of seventy-eight interviews—thirty-six with sixth or seventh graders and forty-two with a parent of theirs. Most of the parents were married or living with a partner, although thirteen were not. Usually we interviewed one kid and one parent per family, but occasionally both a mother and a father were interviewed. All quotations come from the fifty interviews I myself conducted (twenty-two preteens and twenty-eight parents); the rest were conducted by Dr. Kaplan. My interviews ranged from forty-five minutes with the most restless kids to over two hours with the most talkative parents. Several kids lapsed into monosyllabic answers, but most responded fairly well to the interview situation. The majority of interviews took place in the person's home, usually with enough privacy so that no one else could hear us. The rest were conducted mainly in an apartment across from the school, to which I had access, and a few were done in coffee shops, workplaces, or a room at the school.

The thirty-six preteens interviewed were a varied group: twenty-one girls and fifteen boys; twenty-two European Americans and fourteen kids of color (ten African Americans, two Asian Americans, two Latinos). Their family incomes ranged from under $20,000 to over $200,000. However, we categorized most of the families as lower middle class through upper middle class and only seven as poor or working class. Among the parents' occupations are child care provider, receptionist, janitor, nurse, bookkeeper, project manager (utility company), human resources consultant, and software engineer. With quite a few parents, it proved difficult to categorize them neatly in terms of what percent time they were employed. I found considerable flux as people moved in and out of the labor force or changed their jobs or their number of hours at work. Only three of the forty-two parents had been out of the labor force for the entire period

since their child became a preteen (i.e., turned ten), and the majority had been employed full-time for most or all of that period.

Too Old for Child Care?

For many of the preteens interviewed, the concept of "child care" carries negative associations with being "a little kid." The after-school care programs they attended while in elementary school are linked in their minds with the status of "child," a status from which most are trying to distance themselves. Needing care is one of the markers of being a child.[5] Furthermore, mainstream cultural values celebrate independence and self-reliance.

The use of the term "babysitter" for someone hired to take care of *children* reflects a cultural tendency to infantilize those receiving care. Well before the preteen stage, children commonly respond to their parents' bringing in a babysitter by objecting, "I'm not a baby!" From preteens, the reaction is even stronger. According to his mother, sixth grader Ben would be "*mortified*," would be "almost *insulted*," if she called a babysitter. Her comment captures both the externally oriented feeling of shame (mortification) and the internally oriented feeling of affront to self-concept (insult) that the term can evoke for an eleven-year-old.

Some parents try to circumvent the infantilizing implication of "babysitter" via a change in terminology. When Natalie was in fifth grade, her mother hired a college student to stay with her and a classmate after school. The mother called this person a "tutor," but explains that "it wasn't really tutoring. . . . You didn't want to call it babysitting, 'cause they were too big." Another mother, soon to be working full-time, plans to employ an after-school babysitter for sixth-grade Kim and her fourth-grade brother. However, she worries that Kim "will be hurt that we have to have a babysitter." This mother also thinks about using different language—"a tutor, a mentor, [a] housekeeper, or something"—but realizes that Kim may see through the ploy. A shift in terminology does not solve the problem that, to most of these preteens, *requiring care* itself connotes an undesirable childishness.

When sixth graders described the after-school program they had attended in fifth grade, most stated that they had felt "too old" for it. Some made comments depicting the younger children as infantile:

> *Eva*: There were all these really young tiny kids around.
> *Natalie*: Little kids [were] running around calling you "mommy." . . .
> [They] were always following us everywhere. . . . You could never get
> rid of 'em.

In their remarks, preteens tended not only to *infantilize* the younger participants, but also to *stigmatize* them: they were "brats," "annoying," "noisy," "dirty," and "messy." It is understandable that ten- or eleven-year-olds might not like being with children as young as five; still, I was struck by the level of disdain expressed. In addition to hearing in their statements the dynamics of age stratification, I sensed that they were venting old frustrations at having to stay in programs they felt they had outgrown.

By the fifth-grade year, kids certainly had been complaining to their parents about the programs. "I always told [my mother] that it got really boring," explains Eva, "but she would never take me out of it." Some fifth graders do get taken out, at least for *some* days of the week; typically, fewer fifth graders attend than children from lower grades. The decrease in the number of older kids propels a vicious circle, in that the staff and activities become more geared toward the younger kids, and the older kids feel increasingly dissatisfied.

Seventh grader Angie's voice still seethes with emotion two years later as she describes "stupid" activities she considered "hell on earth." According to her mother, keeping Angie in the program through the end of fifth grade felt like a "holding operation." Pressured by work demands, the parents tried to steel themselves against her complaints. One day in the spring, when all program participants had to go off to an event Angie "despised," she did not report in when school ended, and the group had to leave without her. A teacher located her later and called both parents at work, asking that one of them come and pick her up. After this incident, the parents decided to make some concessions. Although reluctant to reward Angie's behavior, they felt that they needed to address her unhappiness. The parents agreed to her proposal, brushed off before, that, for Wednesdays, she could drop the program and instead walk with a classmate to a nearby public library, where they would stay the rest of the afternoon—a "solution" to which many employed parents resort and that many librarians find problematic (Dowd 1991). Utilizing what flexibility they had in their work schedules, the parents also decided that, on Fridays, one of

them would manage to be with Angie after school. Previously, Angie had not been able to change the situation. By acting out in a way that publicly called attention to her dissatisfaction—and embarrassed her parents—she finally had an impact on the arrangements.

In fifth grade, the main thing that *parents* found problematic about the care programs was that they did not provide enough support for doing homework, which the kids had more of than before. At Angie's program, fifth-grade parents asked the staff to establish a homework time for the older kids. But given space and staff limitations, this ended up meaning that those kids sat at a table and tried to work while the younger kids played loud, active games in the same (large) room. Loreen described a similar atmosphere at her program: "It was noisy. You can't hear yourself think." (Here we encounter a concrete reason to complain about little kids as noisy, but the comments quoted earlier did *not* stem from a desire to do homework.) Some fifth graders parlayed the homework issue into grounds for dropping out of the programs; for example, requests to go instead to the public library tended to be couched in terms of a quiet place to work, whether or not the kids actually did stay quiet or do homework.

As they approached graduation from elementary school, the kids and their parents were finding out (if they had not already known) that, at the public middle schools, there were no regular after-school care programs. For the most part, kids reacted with relief and parents with anxiety. Parents worried about whether they could patch together coverage or whether they should let their kid be "latchkey"—to some parents, a major and alarming care reduction.

The Middle-School Context: Care Resources and School Culture

Moving from elementary to middle school, Harper families experienced an abrupt decline in school-based resources for the after-school hours. In this school district, all ten elementary schools have at least one on-site care program, and some have two. Several of these programs are subsidized by the city for low-income parents. The others are run by nonprofit organizations or private businesses. For elementary school students, the district provides bus transportation not only between home neighborhoods and the school, but also from the school to after-school programs at other schools. Thus, a child can be transported to a lower-cost program. For children attending community-based programs, some programs provide pick-up at the school; in other cases, children take a school bus to the stop nearest the site, and program staff meet them and

walk them from there. Although these options do not meet the needs of every working family, there are substantial resources and supports in place.

For middle schools (except a new "magnet school"), the district provides no bus transportation at all. Though there are city buses, the way the routes are laid out requires many kids to transfer to a second bus. None of the middle schools has a daily after-school *care* program; they only have some after-school *activities* of limited scope. Certainly, middle-school administrators have higher priorities than ensuring on-site care. However, from the perspective of Janna's mother (and a majority of the parents interviewed), "the middle school drops the ball."

The "culture" of the middle school does not support the idea that the kids need care. Peer pressure promotes acting grown-up and asserting autonomy from adults. Sixth graders, some of them still ten years old, become embarrassed about showing signs of dependency. For instance, Kim's mother currently comes on foot to walk her home from school. The mother does not want her crossing busy streets by herself. However, Kim told her mother not to meet her at the school, but two blocks away—a face-saving strategy. The middle-school staff generally try to treat the kids as if they are fairly mature and responsible, which certainly has positive effects, but also can lead to problems. In the next section, I discuss one such problem area—communication of information—that had significant impact on after-school arrangements. After that, I specify ways in which Harper's after-school offerings fall short of what employed parents need and want.

Issues of Information Flow

To set up their care arrangements for the school year, parents have to know about the available after-school activities *in advance*. Several parents spoke about how difficult it had been to find out anything before school started. Especially frustrating to Brian's mother were the casual responses she got from school staff: "It was all kind of 'This is what we hope to have' or 'These are the activities that might be coming on in the future.'" Janna's worried mother found the attitude of a staff member from whom she sought information "very blase."

Even after school started, information did not flow readily or regularly to parents. Interviewed in the late fall and winter, parents almost unanimously said that they did not know much about after-school activities. Elise's mother was especially animated about the

communication problems, from the perspective of an upper-middle-class professional, new to middle-school culture: "[In elementary school,] there was always information coming home. There were always a gazillion announcements. . . . My whole experience [here] has been close to zero communication with parents." In a comment that conveys the impact of these changes, she added, "I almost never know what's going on at school, except what Elise tells me." This mother "paws" through her daughter's backpack, but "there are never any notes."

Self-reflective, Elise's mother sees her own part in the communication gap: "I've got a million things going on in my life, so you need to pound me with information so that I catch some of it. Too much is better than too little because, if I see it six times, at least I'll remember it after the third time." But from the school, she complained, "if you get it once, you're lucky." In the view of some staff members, though, the school lacks the human and financial resources to photocopy a "gazillion" announcements or to assemble and pay for more mailings to parents.

Interviews with the preteens revealed that the school tends to pass on information about after-school activities *orally, to the students*. Seventh grader Maya explained that "normally, they announce things over the intercom thing, and no one pays attention, because everybody's being loud and rowdy and stuff. So no one knows about these things." Other times, teachers read notices aloud in class, but "the kids don't write it down. . . . And then the kids forget about it." Her second observation suggests further implications of these communication patterns. Certainly, kids can be forgetful, but they also *choose* to forget things when they want to and to remember things when they want to. I perceived this factor of selective memory when I asked sixth grader Brian if he had known about some after-school "minicourses" (which already had filled up). His mother, who had found out about them late, wished he had signed up for one or two, instead of being at home unsupervised. Brian answered that he had "kind of heard" about them. I pressed for clarification: "Did you not really hear about them, or you just weren't real interested?" Brian responded, "I didn't really hear about them. And I'm not really interested." In any event, if information flows to preteens more than to parents, the preteens gain some advantage in the family negotiations.

The change in communication patterns reflects new assumptions in middle school about who makes decisions. Of all the parents, the one who noted most explicitly the old and new

assumptions was Brian's mother. She remarked that "parents are involved in all the decisions when they're in elementary school. When they hit middle school, it's, 'Do you want to sign up for this?' and the parents don't even know about it." Elise's mother (the backpack searcher) stated that middle-school staff "don't want to treat them like little kids, but parents are still parents and they deserve to know stuff."

In negotiations about how the preteen will spend the afternoon hours, to some extent, knowledge is power. With parents now more "out of the loop," the preteens, motivated by their own agendas, can choose to ignore or forget about information or to pursue it fervently, as is shown in the case studies below.

Nature of the After-School Activities

Even if preteens and parents manage to find out about them, the after-school activities do not provide enough coverage to solve care problems completely. At the beginning of the year, activities do not start up immediately, but the need for care *is* immediate. When activities commence, they take place on some days of the week and not others, and the days can change on short notice (e.g., for team practices), throwing care schedules into disarray. Some activities last less than an hour and do not cover the whole time span for which care is needed. Operating from prior assumptions, two sixth-grade mothers were surprised to hear that activities did not go until six o'clock. In addition, most activities do not run the entire year; often they are shorter term or seasonal, with fewer in the winter. As Will's mother remarked, "If they don't do something for the whole school year, it's not something you can rely on."

Compared to activities at elementary school, those at middle school tend to be more competitive, more achievement and performance oriented, less beginner-friendly, and therefore less inclusive—limiting the possibilities for kids who need something to do. At Harper, sports teams comprise the bulk of after-school activities, with fewer offerings for kids not athletically inclined. Boys are served better by the sports program than girls, who make up only 30% of the participants. Also, kids with grade averages below "C" cannot participate, which excludes some who are most in need of positive options. For sixth graders, the chances of getting on certain teams are slim. Furthermore, preteens may dislike competitive pressures. Sixth grader Loreen

commented tartly that, in elementary school, "we were just playing for *fun*; now we're playing for a school."

When activities cost money, some kids cannot participate. Given this city's high cost of living, even some middle-income families feel unable to afford certain activities. (Other activities are free or sliding scale or offer scholarships.) On top of charging fees, some programs require parent involvement, which time-poor employed parents may not be able to provide. Eva's mother, who works full-time and considers herself "lower lower middle-class," cited both money and time as factors keeping her eleven-year-old home alone rather than in a drama program: "I felt like the money commitment and the possible time commitment for me would have been more than I could do. By time commitment, I mean they were saying, 'We expect parents to help out with costumes' and this and that, and I'm like, oh God, we won't have time for that."

The desire for more after-school offerings expressed in parent interviews came through also in the school's survey data from four hundred parents. About 70% indicated that recreation programs are "needed" or "urgently needed," and 57% said the same thing about after-school tutoring.

Overall, then, limitations of the school-based activities, difficulties in finding out about them, and the lack of school-bus transportation combined to make problems for many Harper families. These factors precipitated negotiations about whether and to what extent the kids should be "on their own" after school.

Too Young for Self-Care?

Situations characterized as "self-care" or "home alone" vary considerably. In my study, some home alone kids were driven home every day by an adult who watched until they were safely inside, whereas others took city buses and/or walked home. Some kids walked through and lived in areas with higher crime rates than others did. Once at home, some were truly on their own, whereas others were with siblings or friends or had relatives or neighbors in their building or on their block who could keep an eye out for them and be available if needed. Some kids had parents who called and checked on them or who could be reached by phone or pager, and some did not. National statistics indicate that about 35% of twelve-year-olds take care of themselves

regularly after school (U.S. Dept. of Ed. and U.S. Dept. of Justice 1998), but such statistics do not convey the diversity of self-care situations.

Views about whether kids of ten, eleven, and twelve *should* be on their own after school vary among individuals and communities. Within the families I interviewed, kids usually favored home alone arrangements more than parents did. A few parents stated globally that preteens are "too young" to be on their own regularly. Some gave a more specific assessment that *their* particular preteen was too young. For example, one mother worried that her daughter "would just not think about what she was doing and do something that was not the clever thing to do. It wouldn't be intentionally bad. It would just be accidentally bad and so might cause a problem that she didn't know quite how to handle." Those parents not opposed to regular home alone time nonetheless preferred other alternatives for at least some afternoons.

Families' care arrangements often are shaped more by pragmatic factors than by parents' preferences. When preteens refuse to attend care programs with younger kids, when other options are limited and piecing together coverage seems too complicated or difficult, parents may take the path of least resistance and let their kid be home alone. Some parents go down this path long before middle school, if they lack money or other resources (e.g., an available, willing relative) to provide alternatives. Parents who have stretched their budget to pay for care since their kid was an infant or toddler may opt for financial relief rather than ongoing conflict with a preteen intent on being at home after school.

In her studies of dual-earner families, Hochschild (1989, 1997) found that some parents rationalize leaving their children unsupervised for long periods by invoking core U.S. values of independence and self-sufficiency. She argues that, in the face of work/family pressures, these parents are resorting to—or "half-consciously falling back on"—a strategy of "needs reduction" and "emotional asceticism" (1997: 220-29). To convince themselves that children are fine on their own, the parents minimize children's needs for security and companionship. Hochschild perceives this "emotional downsizing" in the use of the term "self-care" to put a better face on the image of the lonely "latchkey child." Talking about "children in self-care" helps us believe that they *are* receiving care and serves to "normalize what commentators in the recent past labeled as neglect" (1995: 339).

In my interviews, it was more often the preteen who invoked values of independence and self-sufficiency. Eva and her mother provide a good example of this pattern. Home by herself after school for two and a half hours, Eva said that she likes this arrangement. "I get to watch all my favorite [TV] programs, and I think it's a good time to think." Asked whether being a "latchkey kid" is bad in some ways or good in some ways, she responded, "Well, I think it's pretty good because you're learning, the child is learning, that they don't always need their parents and that they can be independent, and they can sometimes take charge and do whatever feels right." However, Eva's mother said she has felt "a lot of stress" about the situation and is "not happy with where it's at."

Parents also tended to worry more than kids about whether kids on their own would get home safely. Quite a few kids are crossing major streets at points where there are no traffic lights. Expressing a common concern, one mother described her sixth grader as "still a child who will cross the street without looking." A few parents voiced fears that their preteen is too short to be seen easily by speeding drivers. Danger from adult strangers was another major worry; a number of parents cited recent kidnappings, rapes, and murders of children (especially girls) in the region. Having their kid go home by city buses raised fears for some parents. "There's too many people that are just weird on the buses," a mother explained. "I think [my daughter's] got *some* street smarts, but not a whole lot." Although the kids typically thought that their parents worried *too* much, a few kids did mention dangerous strangers (e.g., "crazy people") as a factor making them at least somewhat willing to accept limits imposed on their mobility by parents. Several parents told me that, in family negotiations, they make sure to communicate that their fears do not reflect a lack of trust in their child. Rather, as one mother put it, "I'm kind of scared about the world."

Although the predominant pattern was for preteens to be pressing reluctant parents for more autonomy, sometimes preteens and parents held similar views about what was appropriate, and, in a few families, parents were the ones promoting autonomy (as in my fourth case study below). However, regardless of what they thought about kids being on their own after school, virtually every preteen and parent interviewed wanted more school-based programs and activities, to expand the possibilities for their care mix.

To illustrate how the various issues I have discussed play themselves out in the lives of working families, I turn now to four short case studies, three of Harper sixth graders and one of a seventh grader. Each preteen represents a different experience with regard to after-school care. Janna (described in the paper's opening) does not want to be home alone, but refuses to go to a child care program. Reggie pushes for more autonomy, but is not supposed to be home alone. Brian has pressed successfully for a home-alone arrangement. Maya is home alone more than she wants to be.

Case #1—Janna (Revisited): *Escaping from Child Care*

An only child of a single mother, Janna started sixth grade with her mother at home on work-related disability but about to begin a full-time job as a paralegal. Janna needed coverage five afternoons a week until 6:00 PM. Her mother would not consider having her stay home alone. Twice already their house had been burglarized; the mother sees the whole neighborhood, two miles from the middle school, as unsafe. Janna herself has no wish to be there alone on a regular basis, even if they could find someone to drive her home. Another factor for the mother, which she tries not to overemphasize to Janna, also concerns her daughter's safety: "She's a very striking-looking young lady. . . . I've had other mothers say to me, that guy over there is looking at your daughter. Men, grown men. . . . I need to protect her. And she knows that she's going to be in a protected atmosphere for the next couple of years."

With nothing like a full-scale after-school program at the middle school, the mother concluded that Janna would have to return to the program at her elementary school. (Of the programs at the city's elementary schools, only hers takes kids past fifth grade, using an age (twelve) rather than grade cutoff.) Transportation was a problem, though; Janna's mother did not want her walking the mile to get there, even with another girl who was going too.

Janna, meanwhile, kept trying to find somewhere else to go. Finally, she came up with school friends at whose homes she could stay two days of the week. With one friend, she could walk just a block and a half to the home. Even so, Janna's mother agreed only because that girl, a seventh grader, is "tough and big" and has a mother at home. On the second day, Janna could be picked up by the other friend's mother. This plan reduced the days at the hated program to three a

week. The transportation problem was solved when a third mother, at home with a back injury but able to pick up her own daughter after school, offered to drive Janna and the other girl to the program, though it was out of her way.

This compromise plan lasted but a week. Emboldened by her status as a middle schooler, Janna took a stronger stand. In her mother's words, "After three days [at the old program], it was like—that's it!" With new determination, Janna tracked down information about after-school activities that would cover *part* of those three afternoons. (The fact that school had been in session several weeks already made it more possible to find out what was happening.) Then she prevailed upon the "tough and big" friend's hospitality for the rest of two of those afternoons and lined up yet another friend with an at-home mother for the remaining afternoon. With this alternative plan in place, Janna's mother felt free to say to me that, at the old program, Janna would have been "sitting there with these little kids." Like the parents of Angie, discussed earlier, Janna's mother had steeled herself against her daughter's unhappiness as long as she did not see a viable alternative. Now she embraces the complicated new plan as her own, calling it "creative taking care of your [kid]."

Having escaped from child care, Janna mostly accepts for now her mother's agenda to keep her in "a protected atmosphere." However, she wants a little more leeway to walk places with friends. In words that sound like a rehearsal for further negotiations with her mother, she maintains that there would not be any problem of peer pressure: "I wouldn't go anywhere that I wasn't supposed to go. And if I didn't want to, then my friends would respect that . . . . They'd be like, 'OK, then we can't do it.'"

In Janna's case, then, the lack of age-appropriate care options almost landed her back in a program that she felt passionately she had outgrown. Only through her own persistence, plus the willingness of four other mothers to become part of her care mix, did she arrive at a solution. Janna's mother, intent on keeping her girl safe, opposed any major care reduction and was fortunate to have friends who could fill in the gaps. Interestingly, Janna's mother indirectly repays the debt by picking up the daughters of two other employed single mothers each morning on her way to work and driving them to the school. These girls both live rather far from Harper,

and their mothers leave for work early. Janna's case suggests that, in the absence of other supports, mothers are doing extra duty to help other mothers manage care problems.

Janna's mother's fears about her walking even a block and a half after school may seem extreme, but, in a Harper survey to which 525 students responded, more than a third (36%) said they do not "feel safe coming to and leaving school." For girls only, the figure was higher: 44% feel unsafe. One rather independent sixth-grade girl had been walking home a mile by herself at the point I interviewed her, but shortly thereafter was followed by some men in a van. Although she succeeded in evading them, she now gets driven home by a friend's mother.

Case #2—Reggie: *Awaiting the Magic Thirteen*

Sixth grader Reggie has two older brothers in high school and a younger sister who stays in a child care program in the afternoons. His mother works forty-five to fifty hours a week in a lower-level management position and has a considerable commute since her company relocated to a suburb a few years ago. She starts work on the late side in order to see the kids off in the mornings, but then gets home as late as 7:30 PM. Reggie's father, a technician, averages forty-five hours a week, but fits them into four long workdays, partly so that on his day off he can visit the kids' schools and monitor their progress. He leaves for work very early and aims to be home around 5:00 PM, but some days he has to work later. His job also requires travel; lately he has been gone one week out of every five. This family is middle income, but the money supports six people. They own a home in an area not considered that safe, although, on their block, neighbors keep an eye out for each other.

In the afternoons, Reggie usually is the first one home; his older brothers arrive a little later. Reggie is allowed to walk the mile and a quarter from school to home, accompanied most of the way by a friend. He accentuates this new level of autonomy by stopping off sometimes for a slice of pizza. But when I asked Reggie how his parents feel about his short stretch of time home alone, he replied:

> They don't really want me to stay here by myself because it's against the law. I'm not supposed to be here by myself because, if somebody were to break in, then they would snatch me because I'm here by myself. And then

my mom would get arrested. . . . The rule says you're supposed to be, like,
thirteen to stay home by yourself.

It seemed that his parents had invented this law because Reggie has been pressing them to let him grow up faster. After school, Reggie likes to "hang out" with his older brothers and their sixteen-year-old friends on the block and do whatever they are doing. His parents want the older brothers to stay close to home and keep watchful eyes on Reggie. From the parents' point of view, Reggie wants to be treated like a sixteen-year-old rather than the twelve-year-old that he is. To help them hold the line against growing-up demands they consider premature, the parents have established their own growing-up schedule. However, they feel the need to bolster their authority with a supposed law.

Reggie's mother wishes sixth graders never had been moved into middle school: "We're forcing them to grow up faster and it's so sad." Both parents are concerned about negative peer pressure and Reggie's propensity to be attracted to "the wrong crowd." When he started middle school (at eleven), his parents wanted to de-emphasize the symbolic import of that transition, so they built up instead the significance of a later transition point, turning thirteen. Reggie told me that "mostly all the stuff that I can't do, I would have to be thirteen to do it." Thirteen has become the magic number when the gates around freedom and independence swing open. Though impatient, Reggie has bought into the parental delaying tactic. Probably it helped that, when I interviewed him, he already was twelve and two months.

To reinforce their policy, Reggie's parents also invoke scenarios of his getting "snatched up." Reggie understands their fears, but thinks they are being too protective. Although the following quotation concerns an evening rather than after-school outing of the older brothers and their friends, it captures Reggie's ability to see both sides of the preteen/parent negotiations. Reggie had pleaded with his parents to let him go with the older boys to a nighttime movie, but

my mom said I wasn't old enough to go. Like she said, if I was thirteen, it would have been a different story. . . . I guess from my parents' point of view, that's too much of a risk, because [if the older boys are] focusing on everything else, like, if [they] were talking and stuff, and I was right behind them, somebody would have snatched me up, and they would look behind, they wouldn't see anybody. . . . But from a kid's point of view, we

would think that it would be okay, just because we're with a group, or if somebody were to snatch somebody up, we'd just beat them up.

Though Reggie still presses for more independence, he expects that he will have to wait out his preteen sentencing to a "protected atmosphere" (Janna's mother's term). Sounding only a little like he was trying to convince himself, Reggie informed me that "thirteen is a good age to do a lot of things."

The parents want to keep Reggie "busy and focused" by getting him into whatever organized activities they can. When I interviewed him in February, Reggie was attending an after-school tutoring program three days a week for an hour, about which the parents were quite pleased. However, they had not heard about any other activities at the school in time to get their son signed up. This family would be supported if more activities were offered at the school (and publicized to parents), activities with sufficient appeal to counter the lure of hanging out with the older boys.

Case #3—Brian: *Happy to Be in the Driver's Seat*

Brian is a sixth grader who has succeeded in using the transition to middle school to speed up his care reduction schedule, despite his parents' discomfort. In previous years, the parents had relied on school-based care programs. Brian's father works forty hours a week in a civil service job; his mother's administrative job requires more than forty hours, including some evenings. His sister, age six, is in child care after school.

When Brian's mother called the middle school to ask about the options, she got little information. At first, the only possibility seemed to be for him to do "school service" after school, helping teachers with assorted tasks (for which students earn credits toward a trip to an amusement park). His mother then would leave work to come and drive him home (about a mile). Fortunately, she works nearby and has some control over her schedule. The family settled on this plan, described here by the mother: "I was rushing out, getting my car, driving, picking him up, taking him home, hanging out until [his father] got home, and going back to work. Most

people can't do it. So what are their alternatives? Nothing. There's nothing in place in the school."

These arrangements did not last long. Brian quickly concluded that doing school service "wasn't very fun, so I decided to walk home after the second week." Only several days into middle-school culture, this (at the time) ten-year-old *decided* that *he* was in the driver's seat. He also decided that he could stay home alone.

Although the mother felt "really hesitant," Brian's parents accepted the new plan, for a few reasons. First, they had not found anything else for him to do. However, they also sympathized with his desire for more independence. His mother explained that "in middle school, he's just wanting to be grown up . . . and we want to let him." Brian also had another agenda that the parents supported. Recently transplanted from his old neighborhood, he was craving friends and had made one, with whom he could walk from school part way. Soon the boys were spending time together at one or the other house, without adult supervision. Brian's mother tried to calm herself with the thought that, because the boys loved playing computer games, they would not get into any trouble.

Uneasy nonetheless, the mother urged Brian to be on the lookout as after-school activities began to appear. He did go to tryouts for two team sports, but gave up because participation was based on playing ability, and he did not think he had a chance. With other activities, though, his mother noticed that he seemed to find out about them only after they were closed, or he would wait too long to sign up or express only lukewarm interest and not follow up. When I interviewed Brian in March, he still was going home alone or with his friend five days a week. His mother articulated his strategy: "I think Brian was just happy to kind of wait it out and is happy enough not to be involved. . . . I think he's really happy with his current situation."

His mother, however, is not happy. She thinks Brian still is "pretty much a kid" and "too young, really, to know how to handle anything that comes along." She said that it still "really surprises" her and her husband that they "immediately let him" be home alone. "We never thought that we would be doing it so early."

With Brian on his own after school, his parents are finding it hard to control what he does:

Interviewer: Once he gets home, are there any rules about what he's supposed to do?

Mother: He's supposed to start his homework. . . . He's supposed to call me. He's not very good at it. . . .

Interviewer: So he's supposed to start on his homework right away, or can he do something else?

Mother: No. He can do—he generally—he really likes the computer. That's what he and his friends do. That's the deal after school, and what we're trying to do is get a handle on him starting his homework, not waiting. . . . They work on it together sometimes, before they do computer. But they just really like computer games. That's there. That's what they do.

Interviewer: Are there any rules or restrictions about the computer games?

Mother: Well, we're trying to limit the number—the amount of time—because it's not good.

The "supposed to's" are not registering with Brian. When I asked him (separately) what he was supposed to do at home in the afternoons, he answered, "I'm not *supposed* to do anything." Asked specifically about rules on computer use, he did admit to some modest limitations: "When I have my friend over, I can use it until he leaves, and regular times I'm not supposed to do it more than an hour, hour and a half." I did not get the impression that this "supposed to" had much weight either.

Brian's mother notes that, with the limited care resources for middle schoolers, "a lot of kids [are] just given keys," without having shown the maturity to be home alone. She fears that kids left unsupervised can get into "a lot of trouble." Although Brian's current friend seems content playing computer games, she worries, "Who is he gonna meet in the future and be influenced by?"

After six months of living with a care reduction she considers problematic, Brian's mother relieves her anxieties by viewing the reduction as "temporary." She sees reason to hope that her current heavy workload will taper down and "that I would be around a lot more than I am now. You know, maybe next year, after the new year"—i.e., eleven more months down the road.

Brian's mother wishes the middle school had armed her better against her son's assertion of autonomy. She wants to see the school "communicating with parents clearly about what's available now, what would be available later, and when that would be available and making sure

that *parents* know, so that parents can guide their children to making decisions." Although this mother is willing to let her eleven-year-old try out *sitting* in the driver's seat, she thinks he should not yet go driving off.

Sympathetic to the burdens already on school staff, Brian's mother hopes that some other "entity" can offer more after-school activities. She emphasizes that, if there are funds for activities, "all of that [should] be in place at the very beginning, when parents are looking hard"—before they fall into accepting arrangements that worry them.

Case #4—Maya: *Home Alone and Hating It*

Maya is a seventh grader at the young end of her grade's age distribution. From an upper-middle-class family, she has a brother in college overseas and another brother finishing high school. Both her parents work at least forty hours a week in professional jobs.

About to turn twelve when I interviewed her in the fall, Maya had stayed at her private elementary school for sixth grade and thus was new to the middle school. Unlike the preteens profiled above, Maya wanted to slow down her growing-up schedule, whereas her parents were trying, gently, to speed it up. In this case, the parents rather than the preteen utilized the transition to middle school to promote greater independence.

While at the private elementary school, over two miles from home, Maya had been picked up after school by her mother, who had arranged for a very early work schedule during those years. (The father handled the before-school parenting shift.) On the occasional days when the mother had needed to work later, she simply could call the school's working-parent-friendly care program and arrange for Maya to stay there as late as six.

Well before Maya's transition to the middle school, located almost a mile from home, her parents gave her notice of impending care reductions. First, they expected that she would be walking to school and back. The mother also intended to change to more normal work hours because doing the early schedule had been difficult personally and professionally. Thus, Maya would have some home alone time (and home with high school brother time). The family assumed that Maya should follow the care reduction schedule of her older brothers, who had felt fine doing those things at that age. Maya, however, was worried. With regard to the walking, she

felt nervous about being hassled by "street people" and teenage boys. Her parents helped her plot out the safest route and took her on practice walks. In contrast to Reggie's mother, Maya's mother downplayed the possibility of being "snatched up," though she did not deny it and discussed what to do in various situations. Maya's father expressed confidence that she would "be able to handle herself."

For the times Maya would be home alone, her parents tried to assuage her fears with technology. They said she could watch TV, keep a portable phone by her side, and set the burglar alarm. This family also had the resources of a fairly safe neighborhood with retired neighbors who often were at home.

When I interviewed Maya in November, her home alone time had been expanding to what she considered "a lot," including times after dark. "I still really hate staying by myself," she told me, "[but] I guess I've gotten used to it." Maya's dislike for being home alone had more than one cause. A difficult experience early in her life had left her with a residue of anxiety, manifested in fears of dark rooms and creaking floors. Watching TV tended to calm her, but if she watched something scary, it could "give me nightmares for a really, really long time, and I'll be scared to do everything." Her father mentioned as another factor Maya's "very social" personality; he thinks that, for her, being alone is "not a natural thing."

Maya emphasizes another factor: she yearns for continued closeness with her parents. More than any other preteen I interviewed, Maya is an unabashed advocate of care as loving support, as intimate connection. She does not feel ashamed to say how much she misses her parents' nurturing as it winds down. She describes herself as "really close" to them and values the daily intimacy of sharing her concerns with them: "I tell them what's up at my school, and I tell them who my friends are, and I tell them everything. And [they] always give me advice." When home alone and having some kind of problem, she regrets that she cannot talk to her parents "right away." Maya sees caring not just as a one-way process, but as reciprocal; for example, she hugs and kisses her mother "at least five times a day." A lot of her friends, she notices, don't tell their parents anything and think that growing up means you cannot be close to them anymore. To Maya, that seems sad.

In her own family, a couple of years back, her parents had initiated what they considered an age-appropriate care reduction when they phased out the nighttime ritual of having one of them tuck her in, read her a story, and tell her, "Good night, Maya. I love you." Maya had feared that they were starting to love her less. In response, her parents offered to reinstate the ritual. Similarly, when Maya expressed anxiety about walking home from middle school, her mother offered to keep on driving her. However, Maya has chosen to go along with the care reductions, "'cause [my parents are] under a lot of pressure with their jobs and stuff. So I don't want to tell them that I want them to stay home with me all the time . . . because they do a lot of stuff for me, and ever since recently, they've stopped doing that for me, and so I'm just getting used to it." Her parents are trying to balance their own readiness to have their youngest child out of the nest more—or in this case, by herself in the nest more—with a sensitivity to her unique personality and needs.

Maya falls toward the far end of this society's spectrum of desiring closeness with parents; she says she wants to stay living with them for the rest of her life. But in having trouble "getting used to" drop-offs in care that augur drop-offs in intimacy, Maya is standing up for emotional closeness. In her own way, she is questioning the structures, priorities, and values around her that seem to be making closeness less possible.

Given the realities of employed parents and home alone time that she and most of her friends face, Maya wishes the school offered more after-school activities. In one of the more surprising moments of my interviews, she mentioned that a lot of kids "end up getting detentions because they have nothing else to do. Like, they're glad to go to detention because that way they don't have to spend a lot of time at home by themselves, or just going home makes them bored." Maya also had stories of how she and various friends did not get into existing activities they would have liked because of inadequate communication: tryouts announced with too short notice, kids not understanding that they had to go to more than one tryout, kids not hearing an announcement over the intercom and finding out too late about signing up.

Maya's mother also favors more after-school options at the school, but not the performance-oriented, competitive kind. She explained that Maya "feels in school a lot of pressure to perform" and has refused to sign up for anything that seems like "more of the same."

This mother would be glad if the school simply had a safe place for Maya to hang out with friends or play sports informally, "just for fun." The mother does not consider the school grounds safe in the afternoons: "It's a big place. There's nobody [i.e., staff] around. Who knows who could be hanging out there."

Like Brian's mother, Maya's mother worries about peer pressure in the months to come; she thinks that, in the after-school hours, her daughter could be drawn into problematic situations. Maya herself informed me that "around my friends, I've always been, like, whatever they're doing I'll do, like, stuff when it's something dangerous." The mother does not see cutting back on her work hours as a possibility for now. Thus, her hopes turn to the school: if only they could have a wide variety of activities—some even "drop-in based" for maximum flexibility— and a lot of staff "around there all the time." She expects it will be difficult to implement this vision.

Conclusions and Implications

The transition to middle school at age ten or eleven is a key phase in the growing-up process, and children navigate it more successfully if they receive support, attention, and supervision from caring adults. However, in the California city under study (as in many other communities), after-school care resources decline abruptly after elementary school, encouraging kids to argue that they no longer need care. Whether they should be on their own for extended periods becomes the focus of family negotiations, with the preteens usually more favorable than their parents. Many employed parents experience substantial stress as they struggle to devise alternatives or slip into "self-care" arrangements with which they are not happy. Parents trying to avoid a major care reduction want more support from the middle school, in the form of expanded after-school offerings and better school-to-parent communication.

Working families would benefit greatly if middle schools had the resources and resolve to address more actively their students' (diverse) after-school care needs. However, it is fully understandable if school staff do not embrace this mandate. Underfunded and understaffed, so many schools are struggling simply to carry out their basic educational mission. The financial and human resources for expanding after-school programs will have to come from collaborative

efforts of all stakeholders in the well-being of young people—government, business, nonprofit organizations, community groups, and the adult citizenry, parents and nonparents alike. Since I started my research at Harper, just such a collaboration has begun to bear fruit, seeded by government funds secured by some dedicated school staff members.

At minimum, if middle schools can plan their after-school activity schedules well in advance and make concerted efforts to communicate this information and the sign-up procedures to parents as well as kids, they will relieve some stress on working families. Beyond that, my research suggests that the most pressing need is to ease the transition to middle school for sixth-grade families by offering some kind of after-school care program, at least for the first semester. At maximum, middle schools could be the site for a wide variety of programs and activities that (separately or in combination) would provide coverage through the end of the afternoon for all students who need or want it. It is important that the activities appeal to kids as well as parents. At the preteen stage, kids feel more entitled to resist activities not to their liking. For sixth graders in particular, more of the activities should be inclusive and at least somewhat fun oriented, rather than competitive and performance oriented. Ideally, kids could sign up for the mix most appropriate for themselves of recreation, homework assistance, skills building, enrichment, community service, socializing with friends, and connecting with caring adults.

As a society, we still have not really faced and solved the care deficit resulting from the greater involvement of mothers in paid labor and the declining public provision of social services. The work and caring that at-home mothers have put into tending to young people in the after-school hours largely have been taken for granted and thus devalued and rendered invisible. It is not surprising that, when sixth graders were placed in middle schools, little attention seems to have gone into addressing how their after-school care needs would be met. Common cultural attitudes regarding care—that one should be as independent and self-sufficient as possible and that people should be cared for only if they absolutely cannot manage on their own—encourage sixth-grade working families to accelerate their care reduction schedules and settle for "self-care."

To counter the simple equating of growing up with care reduction, I have proposed the concept of a *changing care mix*. This concept can serve to remind us that kids of ten, eleven, and

twelve still require care in order to flourish, even if the *kinds* of care differ from what they required at five or seven. Thinking about a care mix encourages us to recognize the multiple forms of labor and loving attention involved in fostering a young person's growth. Traditionally, at-home mothers provided, arranged, or supervised for their preteens the recreation, homework assistance, skills building, enrichment, community service, socializing with friends, and connecting with caring adults that helped them to flourish. With so many mothers occupied in long hours of paid labor, these things do not miraculously happen on their own. The care mix concept suggests that care of young people must be a more collective endeavor. If middle schools, with the support of other institutions and organizations, can add quality options into the after-school mix, then preteens and their parents will have richer possibilities about which to negotiate than child care versus self-care.

Notes

1. For lack of a better term, I use "working families" to mean that the parent(s) are in the paid labor force, but I regret the implication that doing unpaid labor in the home is not work.

2. Certain subcultures and religious groups have such rituals (e.g., the Jewish *bar-* and *bat-mitzvah*).

3. The poll questions did not distinguish between elementary and middle school or between "after-school programs" that are once a week for an hour and those that are five days a week for the whole afternoon. These are common problems in this area of research that make findings difficult to interpret.

4. School statistics indicate that almost half are African American, about a third European American, and the other fifth Latino, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and American Indian. Many of Harper's families are lower to upper middle class, but in 1997, about 20% were on welfare (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), and about 40% had incomes low enough to qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches.

5. Oral communication from Barrie Thorne.

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