



The influence of unsupervised time on elementary school children at high risk for inattention and problem behaviors

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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, changing socioeconomic and family structures have increasingly left children alone without adult supervision. Carefully prepared and limited periods of unsupervised time are not harmful for children. However, long unsupervised periods have harmful effects, particularly for those children at high risk for inattention and problem behaviors. In this study, we examined the influence of unsupervised time on behavior problems by studying a sample of elementary school children at high risk for inattention and problem behaviors. The study analyzed data from the Children's Mental Health Promotion Project, which was conducted in collaboration with education, government, and mental health professionals. The child behavior checklist (CBCL) was administered to assess problem behaviors among first- and fourth-grade children. Multivariate logistic regression analysis was used to evaluate the influence of unsupervised time on children's behavior. A total of 3,270 elementary school children (1,340 first-graders and 1,930 fourth-graders) were available for this study; 1,876 of the 3,270 children (57.4%) reportedly spent a significant amount of time unsupervised during the day. Unsupervised time that exceeded more than 2 h per day increased the risk of delinquency, aggressive behaviors, and somatic complaints, as well as externalizing and internalizing problems. Carefully planned after-school programming and care should be provided to children at high risk for inattention and problem behaviors. Also, a more comprehensive approach is needed to identify the possible mechanisms by which unsupervised time aggravates behavior problems in children predisposed for these behaviors.

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Introduction

For the last few decades, as the socio-occupational environment has changed, the number of full-time working parents has increased. The number of “latchkey children,” a term that generally refers children who frequently care for themselves without parental care or supervision, has increased accordingly (Casper & Smith, 2004). Because sufficient supervision of school-aged children is mandatory for normal development and mental health, unsupervised time can have harmful effects on children. Several studies have reported that unsupervised time was associated with externalizing problems, internalizing problems, and academic under-achievement in adolescents (Li, Feigelman, & Stanton, 2000; Mulhall, Stone, & Stone, 1996; Richardson et al., 1989) and children (Aizzer, 2001; Lee & Cho, 2011; Posner & Vandell, 1994). As a result, many countries enforce a childhood health policy to prevent children’s being home without adult supervision for more than a certain period of time. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has recommended several guidelines for unsupervised time taking into consideration factors such as children’s maturity, environmental availability, and the degree of consensus between parents and children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008). The European Union has also instituted programs for education and care in early childhood and for home visitation (Violence & Injury Prevention Programme, 2007). However, to date, no official or legal guidelines have been established to limit unsupervised time for children and adolescents in the Republic of Korea. As of April 2011, it was estimated that 969,883 (29.57%) elementary school children spend more than one hour each day alone or only with other elementary school children (Ministry of Gender Equality & Family, 2011). A recent study reported that unsupervised time experienced by children in the fourth to sixth grades lowered academic achievement and was associated with problem behaviors in middle school (Lee & Cho, 2011).

Children at high risk for inattention and problem behaviors may be particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of unsupervised time due to their inability to adequately manage time and to perform self-care. For example, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is associated with executive dysfunction (Brown, 2008). Executive dysfunction could result in impaired self-management and organization in an unsupervised situation. ADHD is frequently associated with externalizing (*i.e.*, conduct and oppositional defiant disorder) and internalizing (*i.e.*, depressive and anxiety disorder) psychiatric disorders (Connor, Steeber, & McBurnett, 2010) (Yoshimasu et al., 2012). Unsupervised time can thus be a risk factor for those at high risk for inattention and problem behaviors, which in turn can aggravate internalizing and externalizing problems. To the best of our knowledge, no other studies have investigated the quantity of unsupervised time as a factor or the degree to which unsupervised time influences problem behaviors in this population.

The main hypothesis of this study was that children with these specific conditions would have more problem behaviors as the length of unsupervised time increased. Additionally, we also aimed to explore gender and grade as possible moderating factors. We hypothesized that younger children, who have less biological and psychological maturity, would be more significantly influenced by unsupervised time than would older children. A previous study suggested that as quality of care decreased, boys showed more problem behaviors than girls in an economically disadvantaged sample (Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Maldonado-Carreno, Li-Grining, & Chase-Lansdale, 2010). Another study of the general population also reported that length of unsupervised time had a greater effect on delinquent behaviors in boys than in girls (Lee & Cho, 2011). A study that focused on an ADHD population found that girls (mean age: 11.2; $SD=3.4$) were better able to fill their spare time than were boys (mean age: 10.5; $SD: 3.0$) (Biederman et al., 2002). We therefore hypothesized that unsupervised time would result in more problem behaviors for older boys than for younger girls.

Methods

Subjects and procedures

This study analyzed data from the Children’s Mental Health Promotion Project and was conducted in collaboration by the Gyeonggi Provincial Office of Education, Gyeonggi Province; the Korean Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; and several local Gyeonggi Provincial Mental Health Centers. The Children’s Mental Health Promotion Project was conducted in 210 of 1179 (17.8%) elementary schools in Gyeonggi Province between November 2010 and December 2011. The 210 elementary schools were selected based on cooperativeness and readiness to work with the collaborative institutes involved in the project. Gyeonggi Province is 16,874.59 km² in size, with a population of 11,540,000, and consists of industrial, urban, and rural areas.

The primary objectives of the Children’s Mental Health Promotion Project were to screen children at high risk for inattention and problem behaviors and to provide individual support for assessment and treatment as needed.

First- and fourth-grade elementary school children at high risk for inattention and problem behaviors were included in this study as these ages represented lower and higher grades of elementary school children, respectively. They were screened with the Korean version of the ADHD rating scale (ARS) and the child problem-behavior screening questionnaire (CPSQ). The ARS is a widely used instrument for measuring inattention and hyperactivity symptoms and has good internal reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.77–0.89$) (So, Noh, Kim, Ko, & Koh, 2002). The CPSQ, another widely used screening measure, has been used to assess the general psychopathology of children in the Republic of Korea (Huh et al., 2003; Park, Kim, Park, Kim,

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