



ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

New generation of latchkey children

With longer hours in school, children whose working parents return late, are spending less time unsupervised at home



Venessa Lee

Strictly speaking, Wei is a latchkey kid for about three hours daily on weekdays. The 13-year-old usually returns from school to an empty flat.

She sets out for school at 6.30am and returns home past 7pm. Her mother, a single parent working two jobs in the food industry, leaves home daily at around the same time, and gets back at 10pm. Wei says this has been routine for about six years.

The term "latchkey children", referring to minors who are unsupervised at home after school, gained currency in Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s. The phrase, laden with stereotypical associations of parental neglect and attendant behavioural problems, is less often applied now, in an era where after-school care programmes have flourished.

Wei is arguably part of a new category of latchkey children. Longer hours spent at school have contributed to such children spending less time without adult supervision than previously, social services providers say.

Mr Mohamed Yunos, a vice-president at Jamiyah Children's Home, says: "Kids will spend more time at school and may get home late. If upper primary students go home at 5pm, for example, parents may

not see a need to enrol them in after-school care."

Wei, an only child, says she has a passion for dance, her Co-Curricular Activity (CCA) at school, which ends at 6.30pm, two to three days a week.

"Every day, after school, I've got activities: CCA, basketball, hanging out, self-study, tuition," she says.

Wei, who like other children SundayLife! interviewed did not want to use her full name, gets her own dinner from a coffee shop with the \$5 or so that her mother gives her. She adds that she does not want her mum to worry about her, and declares, with a note of pride in her voice, that she moved up to the Express stream from her Normal (Academic) class last year.

When she comes home and there is nobody there, she finds it "a bit lonely, but never mind". "There are financial and family problems, but we shouldn't be affected," says Wei, adding that she has the support of her mum and the workers at the youth outreach dance programme she attends.

Social worker Gwen Koh, 42, decries the term "latchkey children" as being "a very old label with negative connotations". Instead of seeing them as a social problem, she points to the maturity of some young people who might spend two or three hours alone at home.

"Some of these youth are responsible and can generally tend to themselves. They are adaptive and resilient," says Ms Koh, who works with at-risk youth at Boys' Town YouthReach, the outreach arm of Boys' Town, a voluntary welfare organisation.

She contrasts this new generation of latchkey children to children who have company at home, but are "minimally supervised" and exhibit behavioural problems.

"Some young people perhaps have a grandparent, aunt or maid at home, but they don't want to go home. Even with parents at home, they would stay out till 10pm, for instance. They're not emotionally attached to those people who are at home," explains Ms Koh.

Mohamad, 18, is a youth who felt the adverse effects of minimal supervision at home.

"Since Primary 6, I have been going back home to no one except my grandmother, who is now 90," says Mohamad, whose father died when he was nine. "She couldn't take care of me, I had to take care of her."

Then 12 years old, Mohamad, the youngest of four children, fetched his grandmother her medicine and bought lunch, and cooked fried rice or prepared sandwiches for her. Often, though, he went out and phoned his aunt to check on his grandmother.

"Even if I wanted someone to talk to, there was no one at home I could talk to. I just 'slacked' at my friend's place, where his maid would sometimes cook lunch."

Mohamad, who is now studying nursing at a local polytechnic, says he stayed out till 10 or 11pm, often studying and hanging out with friends at void decks.

"People have tried to ask me to drink alcohol and go to clubs, but I don't. It's because of my religion, I don't want to get myself into trouble," says Mohamad. "Even if I am left alone, it doesn't mean that I will join gangs or turn bad."

He says he understood his family's financial prob-

lems and has taken on part-time jobs since Secondary 1, as a waiter and in customer service positions.

He lives with his grandmother, two older brothers, aged 29 and 28, and his mother, who works as a sales assistant. He "seldom talks to" his mum and brothers. His sister, 25, is living overseas.

Mohamad says he feels "worse" today than when he was first left at home with his grandmother, six years ago.

"I don't feel like I have a family. It's like everyone is on his own, even though we are living under the same roof," he says.

It is because of situations like Mohamad's that Ms Koh objects to the term "latchkey children" because "it doesn't show whether the parents are involved in their children's lives".

What is key is "whether parents have a relationship of trust with their children, to guide them, and whether the kids know what the expectations are of them, and honour that," she explains.

She, like other social workers interviewed, feel there are fewer latchkey children these days, though no official figures exist.

There has been a rise in after-school care. Currently, there are 420 Student Care Centres that administer the ComCare Student Care Subsidies, up from 364 such centres five years ago, in 2009, says a spokesman for the Ministry of Social and Family Development.

But some children, particularly from lower-income groups, may fall through the cracks, staying home alone.

"It might be due to lack of knowledge of student care services, lack of knowledge of government grants available to assist in fees and lack of placement for some areas in Singapore," says Ms Samantha Lim, head of Singapore Children's Society, Student Care Centre (Henderson).

While there may be fewer latchkey children, some of them may still be at risk. With this in mind, Fei Yue Family Service Centre in Woodlands started its Star programme in July last year.

"We noticed there were a lot of children hanging around at the void deck and we wanted to provide a conducive environment for them to study," says Fei Yue counsellor Meiryl Rusli.

One 14-year-old student attends the Star programme for her age group, which takes place once a week. The so-called latchkey life is one that she has known for about five years. She lives with her two older brothers and her mother, who works in sales.

Her school day usually ends at 1.40pm, but she returns home after 7pm because she would be left alone anyway.

She often spends her afternoons window-shopping with friends after lunch at McDonald's or KFC, and watches Korean dramas on her phone when she gets home.

She finds it "sad" and "boring" to return to an empty home with no one to talk to. She talks to her counsellor at Fei Yue Family Service Centre.

She says she failed maths and English, and has skipped school often, nearly resulting in expulsion. She does homework when she feels like it but she "wants to improve" and go to the polytechnic. Sometimes she stir fries broccoli and cooks instant noodles with eggs for herself.

"I want to be a chef."

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