

Kids left at school all alone

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John Masanauskas
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MORE parents are dropping their children off at school early and leaving them unsupervised amid the growing economic crisis.

Principals are concerned about the safety and welfare of kids whose parents are working harder to cope with financial pressures.

Victorian Principals Association president Gabrielle Leigh said yesterday there were growing fears over the issue.

"To keep their jobs, parents are being asked to do different shifts that they mightn't normally have done," she said.

"It becomes an issue in winter when kids are coming in really quite early and they're outside in the ground where it's quite cold."

Schools tell parents not to drop students off before the start of the yard duty teacher's shift, which is usually about 15 minutes before classes begin.

Many schools offer special child-care programs from 7am for pupils whose parents leave early for work.

But some parents believe the costs are too high, especially since there is no discount for short periods of care.

Sharron Healy, who recently returned to the workforce, said she occasionally dropped her daughter off at school up to 15 minutes before the yard duty teacher started patrols.

Ms Healy said she was lucky her daughter was never left alone because there were always parents in the school grounds at the time.

"There is a before-school program, but it charges the same rate whether you're there at 7am or 8.30am, which I think is a bit harsh," she said.

Jo Reilly, spokeswoman for school care provider Camp Australia, said fees were set by individual schools and ranged from \$8 to \$14 for a session.

Ms Reilly said government childcare benefits and rebates were available to help cover costs.

"We get feedback from schools about concerns that children are being dropped off a bit earlier when there's no teacher on yard duty," she said.

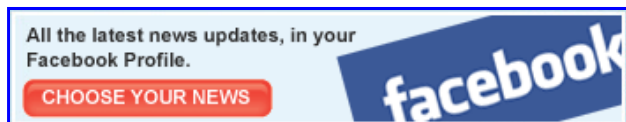
"We want to ensure that parents aren't feeling stressed out about seeing their child in care."

Parents Victoria spokeswoman Elaine Crowle said many schools didn't offer the special programs.

"It's a very tricky area, because schools aren't baby sitters, they are there to educate kids," she said.

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