

Leaving Your Child Home Alone

Authors: Child Welfare Information Gateway. 2007

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/homealone.cfm>

Every parent eventually faces the decision to leave their child home alone for the first time. Whether they are just running to the store for a few minutes or working during after-school hours, parents need to be sure their children have the skills and maturity to handle the situation safely. Being trusted to stay home alone can be a positive experience for a child who is mature and well prepared. It can boost the child's confidence and promote independence and responsibility. However, children face real risks when left unsupervised. Those risks, as well as a child's ability to deal with challenges, must be considered. This factsheet provides some tips to help parents and caregivers when making this important decision.

Depending on the laws and child protective policies in your area, leaving a young child unsupervised may be considered neglect, especially if doing so places the child in danger. If you are concerned about a child who appears to be neglected or inadequately supervised, contact your local child protective services (CPS) agency. If you need help contacting your local CPS agency, call the Childhelp® National Child Abuse Hotline at 800.4.A.CHILD (800.422.4453). Find more information on their website: www.childhelp.org. Or call CPS to get their recommendations 1-(831) 755-4661.

What to Consider Before Leaving Your Child Home Alone

When deciding whether to leave a child home alone, you will want to consider your child's physical, mental, and emotional well-being, as well as laws and policies in your State regarding this issue. There are many resources you can refer to for guidance. (See the end of this factsheet for some of them.) These resources typically address the considerations below.

Legal Guidelines

Some parents look to the law for help in deciding when it is appropriate to leave a child home alone. According to the National Child Care Information Center, only Illinois and Maryland currently have laws regarding a minimum age for leaving a child

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home alone.¹ Even in those States other factors, such as concern for a child's well-being and the amount of time the child is left alone, are considered. States that do not have laws may still offer guidelines for parents. For information on laws and guidelines in your State, contact your local CPS agency. If you need help contacting your local CPS agency, call Childhelp® at 800.422.4453.

Age and Maturity

There is no agreed-upon age when all children are able to stay home alone safely. Because children mature at different rates, you should not base your decision on age alone. You may want to evaluate your child's maturity, and how he or she has demonstrated responsible behavior in the past.

The following questions may help:

- Is your child physically and mentally able to care for him- or herself?
- Does your child obey rules and make good decisions?
- Does your child feel comfortable or fearful about being home alone?

Circumstances

When and how a child is left home alone can make a difference to his or her safety and success. You may want to consider the following questions:

How long will your child be left home alone at one time? Will it be during the day, evening, or night? Will the child need to fix a meal?

How often will the child be expected to care for him- or herself?

How many children are being left home alone? Children who seem ready to stay home alone may not necessarily be ready to care for younger siblings.

Is your home safe and free of hazards?

How safe is your neighborhood?

Safety Skills

In addition to age and maturity, your child will need to master some specific skills before being able to stay home alone safely. In particular, your child needs to know what to do and whom to contact in an emergency situation. Knowledge of basic first aid is also useful. You may want to consider enrolling your child in a safety course such as one offered by the Red Cross.² The following questions may also help:

Does your family have a safety plan for emergencies? Can your child follow this plan?

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Does your child know his or her full name, address, and phone number?

Does your child know where you are and how to contact you at all times?

Does your child know the full names and contact information of other trusted adults, in case of emergency?

Tips for Parents

Once you have determined that your child is ready to stay home alone, the following suggestions may help you to prepare your child and to feel more comfortable about leaving him or her home alone.

Have a trial period.

Leave the child home alone for a short time while staying close to home. This is a good way to see how he or she will manage.

Role play. Act out possible situations to help your child learn what to do.

Establish rules. Make sure your child knows what is (and is not) allowed when you are not home. Some experts suggest making a list of chores or other tasks to keep children busy while you are gone.

Check in. Call your child while you are away to see how it's going, or have a trusted neighbor or friend check in.

Talk about it. Encourage your child to share his or her feelings with you about staying home alone.

Don't overdo it. Even a mature, responsible child shouldn't be home alone too much. Consider other options, such as programs offered by schools, community centers, youth organizations, or churches, to help keep your child busy and involved.

Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
Home Alone Children (Facts for Families No. 46)

www.aacap.org/page.www?section=Facts%20for%20Families&name=Home%20Alone%20Children

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Childhelp®

www.childhelp.org

KidsHealth (The Nemours Foundation's Center for Children's Health Media)

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www.kidshealth.org/parent/firstaid_safe/home/home_alone.html

National Child Care Information Center

Children Home Alone and Babysitter Age Guidelines

www2.nccic.org/poptopics/homealone.html

National Network for Child Care

Home Alone

www.nncc.org/SACC/sac31_home.alone.html

Prevent Child Abuse America

"Home Alone" Child Tips

www.preventchildabuse.org/publications/parents/downloads/home_alone.pdf

www.Safekids.org – worldwide network to keep children safe



Office lines: (831)373-3955 or (831)771-0411

Crisis line (831) 375-HELP or (831) 424-HELP

www.mtryrapecrisis.org