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Leaving Your Child Home Alone



All parents eventually face 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.

What's Inside:

- What to consider before leaving your child home alone
- Tips for parents
- Resources, including State-specific links



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However, children face real risks when left unsupervised. Those risks, as well as a child's comfort level and 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: <http://www.childhelp.org/>

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, developmental, and emotional well-being; his or her willingness to stay home alone; and laws and policies in your State regarding this issue. There are many resources you can consult 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. Many States' child protection laws classify "failing to provide adequate supervision of a child" as child neglect, but most of these States do not provide any detail on what is considered "adequate supervision." In some States, it is considered neglect when a child has been left without supervision at an inappropriate age or in inappropriate circumstances, after considering factors such as the child's age, mental ability, physical condition, the length of the parent's absence, or the home environment—any combination of factors that creates a situation that puts the child at risk of harm. Only three States currently have laws regarding a minimum age for leaving a child home alone. Illinois law requires children to be 14 years old before being left alone; in Maryland, the minimum age is 8, while in Oregon, children must be 10 before being left home alone.

Many States offer guidelines for parents that can assist them in determining when it's appropriate for them to leave their children home alone. (See the end of this factsheet for a listing of States that have posted guidelines on the Internet.) 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?
- How does your child respond to unfamiliar or stressful situations?
- Does your child feel comfortable or fearful about being home alone?

For children with developmental or intellectual disabilities who are not able to stay home alone, parents may be able to arrange supervised options that support independence while maintaining safety and well-being.

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? If so, is there food that can be prepared without using a stove to minimize the risk of fires or burns?
- 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?
- Does your child know how to lock or secure the doors? Does your child have a key to your home or a plan if he or she gets locked out?
- Does your child know what to do if a visitor comes to the door?
- Are there other adults nearby that you trust and who are home and can offer immediate assistance if there is an emergency or your child becomes fearful?

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. This information should be written out and stored in an easily accessible place. Knowledge of basic first aid also is useful. You may want to consider enrolling your child in a safety course such as one offered by the Red Cross.¹ Make sure that there is easy access to first aid supplies at home in case they are needed. The following questions also may help:

- Does your family have a safety plan for emergencies? Can your child follow this plan?
- Does your child know his or her full name, address, and phone number?

¹ For information on course offerings from the Red Cross, visit <http://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/Learn-About-Our-Programs>

- 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?

Even if your child demonstrates knowledge of all this information, it is wise to have it written out in an easily accessible place.

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 such as how to manage visitors who come to the door or how to answer phone calls in a way that doesn't reveal that a parent is not at home.
- **Establish rules.** Make sure your child knows what is (and is not) allowed when you are not home. Set clear limits on the use of cable television, computers and other electronic devices, and the Internet.² Some experts suggest making a list of chores or other tasks to keep children busy while you are gone.
- **Discuss emergencies.** What does the child consider an emergency? What does the parent consider an emergency? Have a code word that the parent and child can use in the event of any emergency.
- **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. Have this conversation before leaving your child and then, when you return, talk with your child about his or her experiences and feelings while you were away. This is particularly important when your child is first beginning to stay home alone, but a quick check-in is always helpful after being away.
- **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 faith-based organizations, to help keep your child connected and involved.

² For guidance on how to set parental controls on cable television and Internet content, contact your service provider(s).

Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Home Alone Children (Facts for Families No. 46)

<http://www.aacap.org/page/ww?section=Facts%20for%20Families&name=Home%20Alone%20Children>

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

Leaving Your Child Home Alone

http://kidshealth.org/parent/firstaid_safe/home/home_alone.html

National Network for Child Care

Home Alone

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

Prevent Child Abuse America

"Home Alone" Child Tips

<http://www.preventchildabuse.org/images/docs/homealonechildtips.pdf>

State-Specific Home-Along Resources

Arizona: <https://www.azdes.gov/landing.aspx?id=9694>

California: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/caqhomealone.asp>

Colorado:

<http://www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/CDHS-ChildYouthFam/CBON/1251617279471>

Connecticut:

http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/child_welfare_services/pdf/leaving_your_child_alone.pdf

Delaware: <http://kids.delaware.gov/faqs.shtml>

District of Columbia: <http://dc.gov/DC/CFSA/About+CFSA/Who+We+Are/FAQs#1>

Florida: <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/programs/childwelfare/caregivers/whentoleaveyourkidshomealone.shtml>

Georgia: <http://dfcs.dhs.georgia.gov/safety-precautions-when-leaving-children-home-alone>

Idaho: <http://www.211.idaho.gov/elibrary/HomeAlone.html>

Illinois: <http://www.state.il.us/dcf/docs/leave.pdf>

Indiana: http://www.in.gov/dcs/files/Home_Alone_Brochure.pdf

Kansas:

http://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/PPS/Documents/PPM_Forms/Appendices/Appendix_1B.pdf

Maine:

<http://www.mainekids-kin.org/Tip%20Sheets/9%20-%20Is%20your%20child%20ready%20to%20stay%20alone.pdf>

Maryland (Anne Arundel county): <http://www.aacounty.org/dss/children.cfm>

Massachusetts: <http://www.lawlib.state.ma.us/subject/about/childabusefaq.html#home>

Missouri: <http://extension.missouri.edu/extensioninfonet/article.asp?id=2250>

Montana: <http://www.dphhs.mt.gov/publications/isyourchildreadytobehomealone.pdf>

Nebraska:

http://dhhs.ne.gov/children_family_services/Pages/children_family_services_homealone.aspx

New Hampshire: <http://www.dhhs.nh.gov/dphs/documents/home-alone.pdf>

New York: <http://ocfs.ny.gov/main/prevention/faqs.asp#supervision>

North Carolina: <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/contacts/faqs.htm>

North Dakota: http://www.pcand.org/images/stories/Home_Alone_Brochure_lowres.pdf

Ohio: http://jfs.ohio.gov/OCTF/leaving_your_child_home_alone.pdf

Oklahoma:

http://www.okdhs.org/NR/rdonlyres/83731D8C-EA74-4CA4-840F-498451D77245/0/0324_GuidelinesforChildrenLeftAlone_aging_2004.pdf

Pennsylvania: <http://www.phila.gov/dhs/PDFs/homeAlone.pdf>

Texas: https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/About_Child_Protective_Services/faqchildalone.asp

Virginia:

http://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/dfs/cps/intro_page/publications/alone.pdf

Washington: <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/media/052912HomeAlone.pdf>

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