



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 child has 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 and 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 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.

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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.

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 leaving your child home alone and it being perceived as child abuse and neglect, see *Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/define>. 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/>

Some parents look to the law for help in deciding when it is appropriate to leave a child home alone. Only three States currently have laws regarding a minimum age for leaving a child home alone: Illinois, 14 years old; Maryland, 8 years old; and Oregon, 10 years old. 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, leaving a child without supervision at an inappropriate age or in inappropriate circumstances may be considered neglect after considering factors that may put the child at risk of harm, such as the child's age, mental ability, and physical condition; the length of the parent's absence; and the home environment.

Instead, many States offer nonbinding guidelines for parents that can assist them in determining when it's appropriate for them to leave their child home alone. For information on laws and guidelines in your State, contact your local CPS agency. Visit Child Welfare Information Gateway's Related Organizations List for Contact Information for Local and County Child Welfare Agencies at https://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunctionsaction=rols:main.dspList&rolType=Custom&RS_ID=56&rList=ROL.

Age and Maturity

There is no agreed-upon age when a child can 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? Hazards can include nonworking smoke alarms; improperly stored cleaning chemicals, firearms, and medication; unsecured furniture, pools, unlocked alcohol, etc.
- How safe is your neighborhood? Is there a high incidence of crime?
- 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 the home (e.g., friend, family, or neighbor) who you trust and can offer immediate assistance if there is an emergency or your child becomes fearful?
- Can you or a trusted, nearby adult be easily contacted by the child?

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 in a way the child can understand and stored in an easily accessible place. Knowledge of basic first aid, such as how to check for breathing, assist with choking, and treat burns, also is

useful. You may want to consider enrolling your child in a safety course such as one offered by the American 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?
- 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 and know to call 9-1-1 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. The Red Cross has created a pediatric first aid reference guide and a safety tip sheet that outline steps parents and children can take to make being home alone safer and less stressful. Access these resources at https://www.redcross.org/images/MEDIA_CustomProductCatalog/m4240175_Pediatric_ready_reference.pdf and <https://www.redcross.org/about-us/news-and-events/news/Red-Cross-Offers-Safety-Tips-For-When-the-Kids-Are-Home-Alone.html>.

Youth Babysitting Other Children

In households with more than one child, one of the challenges can be deciding when the elder child, who may be ready to stay home alone, can supervise his or her younger sibling(s). While there is no clear-cut answer, consider asking your child the same questions for staying home alone, in addition to the following:

- Are you comfortable handling being in charge without abusing it?
- Are you able to calmly handle any emergency or other problems that arise?
- Are you willing to be responsible for the safety of your sibling(s)?

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

Other things to consider are the age of the younger sibling(s), sibling dynamics, and if the younger sibling(s) have any special needs. Consider having your child prepare with a course through your local Red Cross or YMCA. The Red Cross offers resource materials and online and in-person babysitting and child care courses for those ages 11 and older. These 4-hour courses cover basic child care, what to do in emergencies, and more. They also offer courses in first aid and CPR. Find out more information at <https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/babysitting-child-care>.

Communication

As cell phones are more widely used as the primary method of contact, landlines are becoming rarer. If your house does not have a landline and your child does not have his or her own cell phone, parents need to consider how their child will be able to communicate in case of an emergency.

If you have reliable internet access at home, an iPod, iPad, other tablet, or computer are additional options to consider as means of communication. These often have features such as FaceTime, Messaging, Skype, or similar apps and may allow you to communicate with your child. However, these applications cannot make emergency phone calls to 9-1-1. Another option is to get your child an inexpensive mobile phone to use while they are alone. Many retail outlets offer inexpensive phones with limited features, sometimes called a “dumb phone,” that could be a good fit for this purpose. Your choice will differ depending on your circumstances, but the importance of having reliable communication cannot be overstated.

When deciding which forms of communication to use, consider these questions:

- Does your child know how to use a computer or tablet?
- Does your child know how to use a phone (cell or landline)?
- If there is an emergency, does your child know who to contact and how to do so (e.g., call 9-1-1)?

In addition, parents should establish clear guidelines for their children regarding the use of technology, such as social media and the internet. Parents should teach their child safe internet behaviors, including not giving out personal information, and that talking to people in a chat room or on social media is the same as talking with strangers. For more information on youth and social media, see our publication, *Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers*, at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/smtips-parent/>.

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 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 let them know they'll have a trusted neighbor or friend check in on them.

² For guidance on how to set parental controls on cable television and internet content, contact your service provider.

- **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.
- **Follow up.** After a child is left home alone, talk about his or her experience. How did he or she feel about it? Was your child nervous? Did anything unexpected come up? If the child was watching a younger sibling, ask how he or she felt about doing so.

Leaving Your Child Home Alone Overnight

It is generally recommended that parents should hold off on letting their child stay home alone overnight until their late teens, but that decision may depend on the maturity of the child. The following questions could be helpful in deciding:

- Can your teen resist peer pressure?
- Is your teen likely to be fearful?
- How well does your teen follow the rules?

Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

"Home Alone Children" (*Facts for Families*, No. 46)

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Home-Along-Children-046.aspx

"Internet Use in Children" (*Facts for Families*, No. 59)

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-Online-059.aspx

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

Fresno Council on Child Abuse & Prevention

Staying Home Alone

<http://dig.abclocal.go.com/kfsn/PDF/Self-Care-Readiness.pdf>

Prevent Child Abuse America

"Home Alone" *Child Tips*

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

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