Is Your Child Ready to be Home Alone?

AGE

You should not leave your child at home alone if he/she is younger than 10. Most child welfare agencies recommend to not leave a child younger than 12 at home alone.

NEIGHBORHOOD

Consider various characteristics of your neighborhood; for example, crime rate, amount of traffic, and how well your child knows your neighbors. High crime, heavy traffic, and isolation from neighborhood are factors that should deter you from leaving your child at home alone.

CHILD’S READINESS

- Child shows responsibility in other areas, such as being able to complete homework on their own, and can make good judgements
- Make sure to discuss your child’s readiness with them openly and honestly, and make sure they know that it’s okay if they’re not comfortable being home alone. (Be careful how you phrase this discussion--note that if your child is aware that you are worried about paying for after-school care, they will be less likely to express their discomfort to you about staying home alone.)
- You have taught your child to calmly handle unexpected situations or emergencies (knows what to do if there is a small fire in the kitchen, the smoke alarm goes off, there is severe weather, a stranger comes to the door, someone calls for a parent that is not home, etc.)
- Child knows basic skills including how to use the phone, basic first aid (i.e. applying a band-aid or running cold water on a burn), and how to get home from school safely
- You have a list of rules for your house that your child understands and can follow. Your child knows what is expected when they are home alone—for example, that they are to take care of their younger siblings, or they are not allowed to eat lots of snacks, etc.
- You have made sure that your child can understand and follow safety measures (knows how and when to call 911, knows to stay away from strangers, work the home security system if you have one, lock and unlock doors, say their name, address, and phone number specifically for 911 purposes)

MAKE RULES

Discuss and plan rules with your child so that they can understand the reasoning behind them and are thus more likely to follow them. Make sure the rules are posted somewhere your child can easily see them.

Consider rules about:
- Having friends over
- Rooms of the house that are off limits, especially with friends
• TV time and types of shows allowed and not allowed
• Internet and computer rules
• Kitchen and cooking, i.e. what utensils and appliances are off-limits
• Not opening the door for strangers, lock the doors after getting home
• Answering the phone (should they answer and how not to let the person on the phone know that they are home alone, i.e. “My mom is not able to come to the phone right now. May I take a message and have her call you back when she is available?”)
• Getting along with siblings
• Checking in (Should they call you at a designated time or will you call them and they must answer?)
• Homework
• Chores
• Leaving the house

If your child is unable to follow a necessary rule—for example, if they frequently fight with their sibling, or will not do their homework—you may want to consider not leaving them home alone.

PRACTICE

It is important to make practice runs beforehand to prepare your child for being at home alone. Leave your child at home for 30 minutes to an hour and stay close by and easily reachable. When you return, discuss how it went and talk about things that you might want to change or skills that your child might need to learn for the next time.

It is also important to practice different scenarios about what your child would do in various situations such as:

• smelled smoke or started a small fire in the microwave
• a stranger knocked at the door (pretend a man knocks on the door and says he has a delivery that must be delivered today)
• someone called for you while you were gone
• can’t reach you by phone
• loses the key
• gets hurt
• how to exit the home safely in emergency situations

It is beneficial to review these difficult situations and help your child to openly discuss what they feel they should do. Review them every several months.

SUGGESTIONS

1. It’s best to only leave your child at home alone during the day and for no more than 3 hours.
2. Set up a schedule for calling. You might have your child call right away if he or she is coming home to an empty house, or set up a time when you'll call home to check in. Figure out something that’s convenient for both of you. Make sure your child understands when you’re readily available and when you might not be able to answer a call. Research shows that children are less likely to get into trouble when home alone if their parents call to check on them.

3. Make sure your house has everyday goods and emergency supplies. Stock the kitchen with healthy foods for snacking.

4. Leave flashlights in an accessible place in case of a power outage. Post important phone numbers — yours and those of friends, family members, neighbors, the doctor, police, and fire department — that your child might need in an emergency.

5. Create a list of friends your child can call or things your child can do if lonely.

6. Leave a snack or a note so your child knows you’re thinking of him or her.

7. Make up a schedule of things to do for your child to follow while you’re away.

8. Make sure the parental controls and filtering systems, if you have any, are programmed for the Internet on your computer and on your TV.

9. Be sure to secure anything that could be a health or safety risk. Lock them up and put them in a place where kids can’t get to them or, when possible, remove them from your home. These items include:
   - alcohol
   - prescription medications
   - over-the-counter medications that could cause problems if taken in excess: sleeping pills, cough medicine, etc.
   - guns (if you do keep one, make sure it is locked up and leave it unloaded and stored away from ammunition)
   - tobacco
   - car keys
   - lighters and matches

10. Always let your children know when you will be home. If you have a change in plans, call your child. Children get worried when things don’t happen in the way they expect.

11. When you come home, spend some time with your child.

12. Be sure to praise your child for following the rules.

13. Now and then, ask your child to talk about what it feels like being home alone. See if there is anything else you can do to help him/her feel comfortable and safe.

14. Things do not always go well when leaving a child at home alone. Children do make mistakes, which can help them learn. However, if you feel your child is not ready to be home alone, it’s okay to change your mind and look for another safe place until your child is ready.

15. Adding younger siblings to the equation makes things more complex. There can be absolutely no question about the child’s maturity, responsibility, knowledge of safety precautions and communication skills if you consider entrusting them with the care of younger siblings. Ideally, a child should have some experience as a ‘mother’s helper’ or babysitter before being left in charge on a regular basis.