



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

Is It Okay To Leave Her Home Alone?

When to leave a child home alone is a difficult decision for most parents. The line between appropriate protection/supervision and the fostering of self-confidence/independence is not an easy one to determine. Unfortunately in all too many cases, family circumstances rather than parental judgment, dictate the decision. Before this happens in your family, it may be a good idea to consider your answers to the following questions.

Age alone is not a reliable guide.

How Mature is My Child?

Children vary widely in their ability to follow instructions, occupy themselves, cope sensibly with unexpected situations, and resist temptations. Generally speaking, many ten-year-olds are ready to handle being alone for short periods of time. Age alone, however, is not a reliable guide. Sometimes children will give signals to help assess their maturing, such as spending more time on their own, taking more responsibility for homework or doing chores without reminders.

A determination that your child is mature enough to be left alone for an hour or two doesn't mean that she is ready to be left in charge of a younger sibling or neighbor.

How Safe and Familiar is My Neighborhood?

If a neighbor is not available, reliable, and familiar to your child, you may want to be more cautious about leaving her unsupervised. A familiar and willing neighbor can ease the minds of both parent and child. It is a good idea to make sure you have discussed issues among the three of you so all are acquainted with the plan.

Have I Talked with My Child About Strangers?

Most likely, you have already introduced this subject to your child. It may be worthwhile at this point to review previous messages. A stranger who approaches a child for any reason

should always be regarded with suspicion. Yet there are times when the best thing your child can do is to approach a stranger—when he is lost in the shopping mall, for example. In these cases, children should be encouraged to thoughtfully choose a stranger such as a person in uniform, store employee, or a mother with children in tow. Explain to your child that an adult with a genuine problem would never ask a child for help—he would ask another adult instead. Warn your child to reject any such request.

After considering these factors to your satisfaction, you can begin preparing your child (and yourself!) for time alone—one step at a time.

Step 1. Establish Clear Rules and Routines

Children have an easier time following rules if they are specific. Discuss with your child how far from home she can venture, whether friends are allowed inside the house and if so, how many, time limits for telephone conversations, and acceptable before-dinner snacks.

Make a schedule of activities and post it on the refrigerator. Be specific. For example:

| | |
|---------|--|
| 3:15 pm | Call Mom at work (or Grandma or a neighbor). |
| 3:20 pm | Fix and eat a snack. |
| 3:30 pm | Finish homework. |
| 4:00 pm | Watch TV or call a friend. |

Having some structure helps make free time less lonely and helps alleviate boredom.

Post a list of important telephone numbers next to your child's schedule. Make sure your child knows how and when



to call 911. Other numbers should include: Mom at work, Dad at work, Neighbor, Relative, Doctor, Fire, Police, Poison Control

Rather than cautionary tales about terrible things that may happen, teach a few basic rules and be specific.

Step 2. Review Safety Plans

Try to do this in a way that does not leave children fearful or overly anxious. Rather than cautionary tales about terrible things that may happen, teach a few basic rules and, again, be specific.

If the doorbell rings:

- Always keep the door locked.
- If someone comes to the door, ask "Who is it?" through a closed, locked door or look through a peephole.
- Do not tell the person you are home alone. Say, "My mom can't come to the door right now. May I give her a message?"
- If a stranger knocks on the door and says, "I must use your telephone; it's an emergency," send the stranger to a neighbor's house or place of business.

If an unknown person calls on the telephone:

- Do not tell the person you are home alone. Say, "My mom can't come to the phone right now. May I take a message and have her call you back?"
- Be polite, but do not offer too much information.

If the door or window is open when the child arrives home:

- Do not go into the house or apartment.
- Go to a neighbor's house or corner store and call your parent or the police for help.

If a fire breaks out:

- Leave the house or apartment right away. Do not stop to take toys, clothes, or even pets with you.
- If you live in an apartment with an elevator, do not use it. Use the stairs instead.
- Call the fire department from a neighbor's house or other safe place.
- Call your parents after you are safely out of danger.

Step 3. Role-Play Emergency Situation

Make up some hypothetical emergencies, write them on file cards, and put them in a jar. Ask your child to draw a card and act out or explain his response. Join in if the situation calls for two people. With your child, develop strategies for what to do if you're late. Practice from time to time by deliberately being late to give your child a chance to show whether he can remember the ideas.

Step 4. Help Your Child Feel Connected To You

Let children know what to expect when they call you at work. If your child has not yet visited your workplace, arrange for her to do so. This helps a child visualize where you are when you are not home. Leave a special message or snack surprise to let your child know she is in your thoughts when you are away from home.

Step 5. Begin with Short Intervals of Absence

Run an errand or visit a neighbor the first few times. Gradually increase the frequency and predictability of your absences. But remember that no child under the age of 15 should be left alone for extended periods of time, particularly at night.

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Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

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The "Question About Kids" series is published by the Center for Early Education and Development to provide state-of-the-art information about young children and families. They are reviewed by a panel of child development experts at the University of Minnesota. For further information, contact the Center at 612-625-3058.