



Home Alone

For Parents

Deciding when your child is old enough to be left home alone is an individual decision and not one parents make easily. In many areas it is illegal to leave children unattended for even one to two hours prior to their 10th birthday and, to be responsible for a younger sibling, children need to be over 12 years of age. Research has shown that in the early school years, children have feelings of loneliness, fear and boredom when left alone. They are also at risk for accidents or for sexual victimization. However, the older child may develop positive feelings of independence and competence when properly prepared to stay alone for short periods of time.

Is your child ready to be left alone?

- Does your child know her/his full name, address, and phone number including area code?
- Does your child know what number to call in case of an emergency? Are these numbers taped by the phone?
- Does your child need to know how to use public transportation or does he/she know what to do if someone other than you is picking him/her up?
- Does your child know how to answer the telephone when you are away, without revealing he/she is alone? e.g., "My mom's in the yard" or "My dad is busy now and will call you back."
- Can your child phone you or a neighbour to report they have arrived home safely?
- Does your child know to not answer the doorbell? Could he/she call the neighbour or police if a person at the door doesn't take "no" for an answer?
- Is your child ready to wear the key



discreetly out of sight and understand never to loan it to anyone?

- Does your child know never go to someone else's house without your permission?
- Does she/he know where to find and use the household fire extinguisher and the first aid kit?

If you answered "yes" to all the above questions, these are a few additional points to consider:

- Check that the furnace, hot water heater and major appliances are in good working order.
- Lock up all medications to avoid accidental poisonings.
- Label and put out of reach all household cleaners and chemicals. Teach children to recognize hazard symbols.
- Provide the phone number of yourself or a parent substitute so your child can seek help or reassurance at any time. Leave a master phone list of emergency numbers beside the phone.
- Leave a radio on. It is comforting for the child to come home to.

- Talk with your child daily about his/her feelings about coming into the house alone and staying alone.

What Can Kids Do?

Being responsible for yourself is "adult business" but you do not need to have all the answers. Even adults ask for advice and help when they need it!

- Always carry your key on you. The best place is out of sight around your neck on a chain or string.
- Practice arriving home alone when there is an adult in the house.
- Go straight home. Unlock the door. Remember to take your key out of the door.
- Turn on the lights. Lock the door behind you.
- Phone your parent or neighbour to say you are home.
- Read the note your parent left you, or make your own list of activities and choose what you will do while you wait for your family to arrive home.
- Talk to your parents about how you feel with these new responsibilities.
- Ask your parents to help you find a book to read or video to watch to help you practise being responsible for yourself.
- Register for a First Aid course. Learn how to use a fire extinguisher.

Additional Resources

Teaching Your Child to Be Home Alone (1994). Earl A. Grollman & Gerri L. Sweder. Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada.

Staying Safe at Home On-line (1999). Cynthia MacGregor. New York: Rosen Publishing Groups Power Kids Press.