

# Safe at Home - - Your Child Alone

Parents leave their school-age children at home alone for a variety of reasons, including unavailability of day care programs for school-age children, cost of care, and pressures from children who feel they're too old to go to a sitter. While most parents would not leave their children on their own if they had a choice, some parents find there are benefits for the family. Children on their own can help around the house and don't require elaborate arrangements for transportation. Parents feel less pressure about unexpected delays at work and having to meet child care deadlines.

Children experience being left unattended in many different ways. Some children are able to assume responsibilities, handle problems, and acquire skills in caring for themselves. Others experience fears that cause them great distress. However, they often do not communicate these fears to parents because they don't want a babysitter, or don't want to add to their parent's worries. Sometimes, there are no open channels of communication where parents and children can really talk through feelings, problems and the over-all situation.

Studies indicate that the fears unattended children experience and the concerns parents have are often very similar. There can be some real risks for children on their own who are not adequately prepared. When parents and children accept joint responsibility, and when children are prepared for and are able to handle being on their own and feel good about themselves, the results can be positive for the whole family.

## When is a child ready?

There is no single answer to this question, no magical age or single indicator that ensures a child is ready. You, as parents, know how your child handles responsibility, follows directions, uses good judgement, and feels about being

home alone. Most experts agree that children under 10 are not ready to be left alone on a regular basis. Some children aren't ready until the age of 12. No child benefits from being alone too much.

If you are considering leaving your child on his or her own on a regular, full-time basis, it may be helpful to have some trial runs first. One way to do this is to leave your child alone for a specified period of time while shopping or visiting a neighbor. Follow up the experience with a discussion with your child about how it felt, listening carefully for his or her reactions. If this works well, increase the amount of time you are gone and leave some specific directions to be followed. After each experience, sit down and talk with your child about how the experience was and how the child felt. If problems exist with fears or inability and unwillingness to assume responsibilities, your child may not be ready for being alone. If the signs indicate that your child can handle the responsibility, keep the channels of communication open for discussion.

## Self-Care Readiness is determined by:

- Age of the child.
- Maturity level (includes intellectual, social and emotional readiness as expressed by child's past behavior)
- Attitude about being left alone (does child feel ready or is child comfortable being alone?)
- Communication between parent and child (are feelings, problems, and expectations discussed openly?)
- Safety level of the environment, including bus stop, neighborhood, etc.

## Questions to ask yourself when considering self-care:

1. Does my child carry out responsibilities according to my directions?
2. Does my child use good judgement?

3. Does my child tell me about problems he/she has at school and at home?
4. Can my child easily reach me or a back up person?
5. Does my child know any other adults nearby who can help him/her?
6. Does my child feel comfortable staying home alone?
7. Does my child get along well with his/her parents?
8. Does my child get along well with his/her siblings?
9. Does my child know personal safety and first-aid skills?

### Activity Planning for the Time Home Alone

Time alone is often easier for children when they and their parents plan how the time will be spent. However, sometimes parents may have unrealistic expectations of what their children can accomplish when they are at home alone. For example, if a child has a hard time doing his homework after school, it might make sense to expect him not to do it when he's home alone.

An "activity plan" structures opportunities for children to have fun and complete tasks. It encourages independence, growth, resourcefulness and responsibility. Parents and children must work together to adapt the plan, reduce boredom and provide variety, which will help promote regular family communication. An activity plan should include:

- **Chores List:** Include specific chores and time required to finish them.
- **Homework:** Specify the amount of time spent on homework each week and the time of the day best suited for getting it done.
- **Television:** Specify programs which the children are allowed to watch and the amount of time given each week to TV viewing.
- **Recreation:** List activities such as playing games, reading books, etc. and specify places where children may go for recreation away from home, including how they go and when they

return. If your child is not allowed to go anywhere, specify this rule in writing.

- **Special Interests:** Identify special activities in which the children would like to participate and any additional arrangements that are needed. Encourage your child to develop hobbies.

### Preparing Your Child to Stay at Home Safely

- *Teach your child the safe use of appliances.* When you are home with your child, let him or her practice using the appliances he/she will be using when home alone. Your child might want to use the toaster oven or microwave to prepare a snack. Other appliances, like irons or space heaters should not be used by children without adult supervision. Indicate to your child which appliances are off limits.

- *Conduct a "safety tour" of the house with your child.* Discuss with your child the handling of poisonous substances, and put out of reach anything that might pose a danger to him, including cigarettes, matches, medicines, and alcohol. Talk to your child about the dangers of these substances.

- *Develop house rules.* Discuss and put in writing rules about having friends over while no adult is home, television watching, talking on the phone, no food outside the kitchen, etc. Rules work best if formulated, discussed, and revised during family meetings. Be sure the rules are specific and that your child understands them.

- *Help combat possible fears.* Sit alone with your child in your home with the radio and television off. Listen for noises - - the "ghosts" of your home. Sit quietly during a nice day and during a storm. Your child should know the sounds of the air conditioner, water softener, old wooden cabinet, squirrels on the roof, etc.

- *Teach your child the difference between a life-threatening emergency and a mishap.* Establish with your child a plan of action in case

of an emergency. The best way to teach this skill is to pose real-life situations and then brainstorm together about possible solutions. For example; “What if your dad was late getting home?”; “What if you came home and saw the door was open?”; “What if you realize you cannot find the keys to your house?”; “What if the smoke alarm went off?”; or “What if the electricity goes out?”

- *Establish “Safe Places” in the neighborhood.* Take your child around your neighborhood and talk about safe routes to and from school or the bus stop, safe places to go, and neighbors who can help in case they lose their key, they find the door unlocked, or need any other assistance. Contact your neighbors to see which ones are home during the day. Get to know these neighbors.

- *Practice how to get in and out of the house safely with your child.* Getting in and out of the apartment or house easily and safely is important for children in self-care. Children should keep the house key in a safe place (not around their neck), and they should also know what to do in case the key gets lost. You may want to consider number coded entry systems for the door or garage door instead of locks and keys.

- *Practice door safety measures with your child.* Children should never open the door to people they don’t know and should never say that their parents are not home. Children should never enter the house if the door is found unlocked or opened, or if they are being followed. Your child should then go to a “safe place” until an adult has checked the house.

- *Practice how to use the telephone with your child.* The telephone can help your child feel less isolated and help you feel more relaxed. With your child, plan when she can call you. If you cannot be called at work, leave a list of other people your child can call. Keep a list of the most important phone number your child might need near the phone. Establish rules about answering or making phone calls.

- *Acknowledge your child’s efforts and responsibility.* Show your child you appreciate her efforts and new responsibilities. You can say: “I really liked the way you came home, put your things away, and entertained yourself!” Connect with her at the end of the day, and plan special activities or games together.

## **Tips For Teaching Your Children to Be Street Smart**

- *Practice safety habits yourself.* You are the biggest influence in your children; if you practice safety measures yourself, your child will certainly learn from you. Whenever you are with your child, explain the safety measure you are using. For example; “This intersection is dangerous, I always cross the street at the cross walk.” If you have any bad habits that your child might pick up, work hard to get rid of them!

- *Teach your child how to avoid injuries.* Basic safety habits will prevent injuries. Children should always buckle up while riding a car, always wear helmets while riding a bicycle or skating, know basic first-aid procedures, know what to do if a dog approaches, etc.

- *Always know where your child is.* Prepare weekly schedules with your child so you know where he/she always is. Leave your schedule at home so your child will know where you are and whom to call if you cannot be reached.

- *Explain to your child the importance of always checking with each other whenever an unscheduled event comes up.* It’s important that your child can get a message to you when he or she has missed the bus, can’t get into the house, etc.

- *Teach your child how to get home safely.* Walk around your neighborhood with your child and show your child safe routes to get home and safe places to go in case help is needed. Instruct your child to go to a neighbor or a pre-arranged place if she feels uneasy about anything.

- *Teach your child how to get help.* Talk to your child about those people he can go to in case help is needed. For example, if you are at the mall with your child, talk about people that can be trusted; guards, store clerks, etc. Also plan on places to meet in case you get separated. While you are home, disconnect the phone and have your child practice calling 911.

- *Your child should never wear clothing with his or her name on it.* Child abductors usually entice children by calling them by their first name. Your children should know that even if a stranger calls them by their name, it does not mean that they can trust that person.

- *Teach your child to be alert and to check the surroundings.* Criminals can usually spot those children who are alone and/or look confused or lost. Talk to your child about staying alert when riding a bus; if your child is wearing headphones or is immersed in reading he/she might miss the stop. Teach your child to be aware of different or unusual cars or trucks in the neighborhood. If you are going with your child on long car rides, ask him to identify different car makes, to read license plates, and to describe people in the cars or on the street. This kind of game can help children develop awareness of their environment.

- *Communicate with your child.* If your child feels he can come to you to discuss anything, he'll feel safe discussing his fears and concerns. Be open and honest with your communication.

- *Encourage your child to "buddy-up" with a friend or neighbor when going anywhere.*

- *Teach your child to scream loudly if he/she is approached by a stranger.* Your child can also yell, "You are not my father/mother" to attract attention. Talk about the different ways strangers can entice him to go with them, such as; "I lost my puppy, can you help me find it?"; or "Your mother asked me to come and get you - she is busy." You can also agree on a family password your child can use when approached by a stranger. If the stranger doesn't know the

password, instruct your child to run and yell for help.

- *Explain to your child the importance of reporting any inappropriate touching.* Talk to your child about "good" secrets, like organizing a surprise birthday party, and "bad" secrets, like not telling you if someone touched him or her inappropriately.

- *Encourage your child to trust his "gut" feelings.* Children usually feel uncomfortable about some people or situations. Your child should stay away from people or places that make him feel uncomfortable. Your child will be able to trust his gut feelings if these feelings are generally acknowledged at home.

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