



by Karen Stephens

Home Alone: When Are Older School-Agers Safe for Short Periods?

Opinions vary as to when children are mature, responsible, capable, and confident enough to be safe home alone for short periods. Your child's overall abilities, sibling ages, living conditions, and neighborhood safety all affect the decision. State child welfare agencies often specify a minimum age for children spending a "reasonable amount" of time alone, too.

Most children long for the chance to be home alone; usually long before they are skilled enough to do so. After all, it's human nature for children to crave the freedom they assume adults enjoy.

Even though children pressure you, it's still a parent's responsibility to be certain children can be left home alone safely. Parenting isn't a popularity contest; it's a sacred pact to protect.

In general, by age 14 years some children can be safely responsible for themselves at home. It should be for short periods. *It's not reasonable to expect school-age children to be in self-care during week-long vacations or when parents are away for vacation.*

Short periods of self-care for *no longer* than 2 hours are workable. This often happens before or after school, or when parents run a short errand. Leaving children in charge for longer periods puts them in danger. For instance, a household or weather emergency could occur. But more likely, peers who hear your child is alone will pressure for parent-free parties. For some children, those peers are awfully hard to resist.

The degree and frequency of your child's fears should also affect your decision. Researchers have learned that "home alone" children hide out of fear under a bed or in a closet on average of once a week. And when siblings are left home alone, physical fighting often occurs.

If your child experiences fear when a telephone rings or someone — like a delivery or utility person — knocks on your door, put off leaving them home alone. Out of pride, children may not admit fears, so observe their behavior to access their comfort and security level.

When your child is ready for the independence, require children to master these skills and knowledge before they are left alone.

You child should be able to:

- cite full name, address and telephone number
- remember and follow multi-step verbal and written directions
- find posted emergency numbers (911, fire, police, poison control, veterinarian, etc.) and know how to relay information to emergency staff

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- know how to contact parents
- recognize signs that indicate the house is not safe to enter, i.e., broken window or open door
- list someone they can turn to for help
- identify their feelings and talk to you whenever something scares or worries them
- identify emergency alerts and sirens
- take shelter during emergencies, such as tornado, hurricane, blizzard, earthquake, flood
- control aggression if siblings are home, too, and be able to abide by household rules

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- keep home-alone arrangements private from strangers, telephone callers, friends, and even e-mail/Internet chat groups
- use telephone answering machine or voice mail to screen calls and only pick up or return those from family
- tell a phone caller a parent is home, but unavailable IF parents allow answering calls without screening (yes, a necessary fib)
- resist answering the door (or if you allow it, children must know to ask for name and identification)
- calmly solve problems, such as a lost key or unworkable lock, power or water outage, homework is forgotten or minor cut needs a bandage
- know location of first aid kit
- enjoy some solitude and entertain self with appropriate games, activities, television, books, or computer programs
- understand limits, such as no bike riding, leaving home unlocked, or watching R-rated television programs, videos, or DVDs
- care for family pets and know how to contact your veterinarian
- prepare a snack without using an electric or gas appliance
- identify an emergency that needs immediate help, such as fire, gas leak, electrical smell or spark, or injury (such as deep cut or burn)
- understand they never have to stay home alone if they are afraid or worried.

Remember, no decision has to be permanent. Rushing children into self care — even when they beg for the privilege — can do more harm than good. If home-alone doesn't work out, put off the experience for a while. You can always try again as your child grows and matures.

Resource:

Home Alone Video for Kids (VHS or DVD, \$49.95) from Kid Safety of America at www.kidsafetystore.com.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.