

When Your Child Is Home Alone

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Is your child ever home alone? Reduce your worry and protect your child by teaching the following simple safety rules.

There is no magical age when a child is ready to stay alone. You know your child's abilities best. At first, leave your child for short periods of time and see how she handles being on her own. If all goes well, try longer time periods.

It's not unusual for children, as well as their parents, to have fears about staying alone. Talk about concerns before your child stays alone for the first time. Keep encouraging him to tell you about any fears he has.

Be dependable. If you say you'll be home at 5:30 and don't get there until 6:45 your child will worry and become frightened. Call if you're going to be late.

Tell children not to broadcast the fact they're home alone. Only parents, relatives, a close neighbor and your child's teacher should know.

If children go home along after school, have them call you as soon as they get to the house. Or, call them the first chance you can. If you haven't heard from them at the usual time, call a neighbor to check on them.

Have your children practice answering the door and the phone. They should never say they are home alone. Instead, children should say that you are busy and ask for the caller's name and telephone number. Tell children not to open the door for anyone unless okayed by you ahead of time.

Set rules for what children can and can't do while they are alone, such as doing homework, choosing snacks, and playing with friends. Rules provide structure and help children feel secure. Avoid making rules you can't enforce, like "no TV in the afternoon."

Make a list of those chores you expect your child to do. Which ones should they do daily? Weekly? Make sure the chores are within the child's ability to do.

Have a plan for children to follow in case of emergencies like fires, severe weather, and accidents. Teach children basic first aid. Place emergency numbers near or on the telephone. Practice and review your emergency plan with your child often.

Problems often come up when an older child is in charge of younger brothers and sisters. If possible, try putting each child in charge of him or herself. Figure out what problems might occur and set up rules to cover such situations.

Provide healthful snacks, such as carrot and celery sticks, cheese sticks, cheese, fruit, peanut butter, fruit juice and milk. If children are expected to do advance preparation for dinner, assignments should be clearly stated. Teach food preparation safety. Leave notes with cheerful greetings, jokes and information about family doings. Be sure every note is not an order to do something. Nearly 6 million children under 13 in our country care for themselves. Observing these safety ideas can help keep your children safe.