

Staying Home Alone: Is your child ready for self-care?

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Deciding when a child is capable of staying home alone is a difficult one for any parent. At some point in time, most children will need to stay alone before or after school, during the summer break or while a parent runs an errand. Communicating and working with a child can help him prepare for being alone and thrive while parents are away.

How do I determine if my child is able to stay at home alone?

Several factors should be considered before a child stays home alone:

Does your child express a desire to stay alone?

Can your child make good decisions, show responsibility over tasks you have given in the past, and communicate well with you?

Is the area you live in safe?

Are there other adults in the area that would be available to assist your child if needed?

Are there younger children in the house the child would be responsible for?

There is not a magical age at which children are ready to be home alone. Every child is different. Not every child is able to handle the responsibility of staying alone the same.

Your child could be 13, yet she may not make decisions well. She may not feel comfortable staying home alone all summer watching her younger sister. Finding alternative child care arrangements while working with your child to develop her decision-making skills will eventually help her succeed at staying home alone. On the other hand, a 10 year old who is comfortable being alone, lives in a safe area, and has proven herself to be responsible, may be ready to stay at home by herself while her parents run some errands.

Check with your local Family Support Division for their recommended minimum age guidelines for children staying home alone in your community. Then work with your child to determine if she is ready to stay home without parental supervision.

What skills should my child have before staying home alone?

Answer the following questions to see if your child can succeed while home alone. You may have others to add to the list.

Does your child know what to do if someone knocks at the door? Children should know what to do if a stranger is at the door as well as what to do should someone come to the house looking for help or trying to deliver a package or attempting to repair something on your home (checking gas lines, etc.).

Does your child know how to answer the phone without giving away personal information or mentioning that no adults are home? Does your child know what to do if he receives a prank phone call?

Does your child know who to call if there is an emergency or fire?

Is your child able to make a snack or entertain himself when bored?

Don't simply ask your child if she is able to do something – have her show you. For example, practice calling your child to see what her phone skills are like or have her show you where she would go in case of severe weather.

Role playing with your children can teach valuable skills and can help you evaluate where your child needs some improvement. Some example role plays are:

- *A man knocks at the door and says he has a delivery for you. He says he needs a signature and that it must be delivered today.
- *A woman parked in front of your house says she has locked her keys in the car. She wants to know if she can use the phone in your house.
- *You arrive home and a window is cracked open. Normally all windows are kept closed.
- *You slip down the steps and twist your ankle. You can still walk, but it hurts.
- *While walking home with a friend, an older child pushes you down and then walks off.

As you work with your child on these and other role plays, remember that it is beneficial to review/replay them every several months. Reviewing these difficult situations will help keep decision-making skills fresh in your child's mind. Role playing, instead of just discussing these situations, will help your child know what to do in case one of these circumstances arise.

What can I do to make my child's time at home easier?

Begin with setting clear rules for your child. Work with him/her to develop these rules. If your children are involved in this process and understand the reasoning behind the rules, they are more likely to follow them. Keep in mind what your child is able to do at his age and what is safe for him to do on his own. For example, it may not be safe to require a ten year old to mow the entire yard before his parents return home. A more reasonable alternative would be for him to feed the dog and water the plants.

Remember to post the rules in clear view so your child can remember what is expected of her. Clear and consistent consequences will also help direct your child's behavior.

There are many other things you can do to improve the quality of your child's time at home. Post important telephone numbers near the phone. Always make sure the child can contact a designated adult in case you are not available. Discuss activities your child should accomplish (chores, homework, etc.) and help her think of new, fun things that she could do until you return. Leave notes of encouragement to let your child know she is doing a good job.

Obviously, the safety of your child is extremely important. Consider having a family password for other adults that may have interactions with your child while he is alone. Hide a spare key somewhere for your child or leave a copy with a trusted neighbor. Reassure children that it is okay not to answer the phone, not to open the door and not to provide help to a stranger. Teach your child to ask for help if he feels uncomfortable at any time.

Remember to periodically reevaluate your child's situation and keep communication lines open to relieve any fears she may have about being alone. Working closely with your child can bring her relief and confidence, and can make your child's experience at home satisfying and beneficial to her development.

For more information see:

Home Safety Checklist

<http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/hesguide/humanrel/gh6020.htm>

Development During the School-Age Years of 6 Through 11

<http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/hesguide/humanrel/gh6235.htm>

You can find order info for "**At Home Alone: A Self-Study Guide for Families With Children Who Spend Time At Home Alone,**" at
<http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/miscpubs/mp0636.htm>

Resources:

At Home Alone: A Self-Study Guide for Families with Children Who Spend Time at Home Alone, Karen DeBord, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Missouri-Columbia, University Extension, MP636

Building Strong Families Program, Child Self-Care Module, University of Missouri Extension, originally written by Martha Bowen, HES Specialist

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<http://missourifamilies.org/features/parentingarticles/parenting61.htm>