



PEN Notes: Fact Sheet #9

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Home Alone



It is estimated that over 40% of children are left home alone at some time while parents are working, running errands, or at some social engagement. Thousands of children care for themselves before school or arrive home from school to an empty house. And there is no magical age at which children develop the maturity or good sense to stay alone. Are your children ready for this responsibility?

Children who stay alone need to know

How to react to situations such as

- Being afraid
- Being bored
- Being lonely
- Being locked out
- Arguments with brothers and sisters

House rules when parents leave the house

- Having friends in
- Cooking and use of kitchen equipment
- Appropriate snacks and meals
- Talking with friends on the phone
- Duties to be completed while home alone



Children who stay alone need to have

Good telephone skills

- A list of emergency numbers, parents' names, and home address by the phone
- Knowledge of what to say in an emergency situation
- How to respond if someone calls
- Understanding of appropriate and inappropriate reasons for calling parents or other adults for help

Good personal safety skills

- How to answer the door when alone
- How to lock and unlock doors/windows
- What to do if approached by a stranger on the way home
- What to do if they think someone is in the house when they get home
- What to do if someone touches them inappropriately

Good home safety skills:

- Kitchen safety (use of appliances, knives and utensils)
- What to do if they smell smoke or gas
- What to do in the event of a fire
- What to do during severe storms
- Basic first aid techniques and how to know when to get help
- What to do if a stranger comes to the door
- What to do if the power goes out



A child who is prepared for the experience of staying alone may enjoy the independence and be able to accept the responsibility of being home alone. With the right rules and basic safety guidelines, the experience can build self-esteem, confidence, and competence. Do not frighten children when teaching them personal safety and caution; don't give them too much information at once, so they will absorb all the material.

Other factors to consider when thinking of self-care are:

1. The neighborhood in which you live
2. The availability of adults nearby
3. How long your child will be alone

Signs to look for in your child to indicate he or she might be ready to stay alone:



1. Willingness to stay alone
2. Can accept responsibility and make decisions independently
3. Can get ready for school on time
4. Can solve age-appropriate problems
5. Can complete home work and house hold chores with little supervision
6. Can remember to tell you where she is going and when she will return

It is not possible to make a general statement about when a child can be left home. Many states have laws which hold parents responsible for the supervision of their children. Older adolescents are usually responsible enough to manage alone for limited periods of time. Parent(s) must consider the child's level of maturity and past evidence of responsible behavior and good judgment. When a child is ready to be left alone, a graduated approach should be used starting with a very short period of time (e.g.1 hour).

These abilities begin to appear around twelve years of age but remember good parent-child communication is important so that any fears or problems can be quickly discussed or dealt with. Children nine years of age and older can be left alone for short periods of time, but never overnight. Children should be at least twelve years of age before they are left to supervise younger children. (Sources: "Preparing Children to Stay Alone" North Central Regional Extension Publication # 248 American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) Website

Farmer, Maudester "Home Alone, Children Gain Self Esteem, Confidence" Ohio State University