

# WHEN TO LEAVE YOUR KIDS HOME ALONE



Eventually every parent is faced with the question of whether his or her child is old enough to begin staying home alone. When older children are placed in situations of independence that they can handle, it can help them learn responsibility. However, asking too much too soon is dangerous and holds consequences for the child and the parent.

Children left unsupervised or in the care of young siblings are at increased risk for accidental injury and behavioral and academic problems. Florida law does not have a hard and fast rule about when children can be left home alone, but instead expects parents to take all of the circumstances into account when deciding what level of supervision is needed.

Because children mature at different rates, there is no single, pre-set age at which children are considered “old enough” to stay home by themselves for short periods. Parents must evaluate their child’s individual development and physical capabilities.

The National SAFE KIDS Campaign recommends that children not be left alone before the age of 12. Many other children will not be ready until later than that. Also, experts caution that older siblings are generally not ready for the responsibility of supervising younger children until the age of 15 or older.

## **The following are some questions families should answer before making this important decision:**

- Is my child comfortable, confident and willing to stay home alone?
- Does my child consistently follow my rules and guidelines?
- Has my child demonstrated good independent judgment and problem-solving skills in the past?
- Is my child able to stay calm and not panic when confronted with unexpected events?
- Have I brainstormed with my child about what unexpected situations could possibly come up while he or she is alone, and how to handle them?
- Is my child consistently truthful with me? Does he or she readily come to me with problems and concerns?
- Does my child understand the importance of safety and know basic safety procedures?
- Will my child make decisions to stay safe, even at the risk of seeming rude or overly cautious to other children or adults?
- Does my child have the ability to calmly provide his/her name, address, phone number and directions to our home in an emergency?
- Can my child lock and unlock the doors and windows of our home?
- Can my child tell time?
- Is my child able to work independently on homework?
- Have my child and I established a clearly structured routine for when he or she is home alone, with defined responsibilities and privileges?
- If I have more than one child staying home, have the children demonstrated the ability to get along well and solve conflicts without physical fighting or adult intervention?
- Have my child and I had some “dry runs” to allow him or her to practice self-care skills while I am at home, but purposefully “not available”?
- Is our neighborhood safe?
- Do we have neighbors that my child and I know and trust?

After reviewing this list of questions, you’ll have a better idea of how ready your child is to stay home alone. These are only general guidelines. Parents and other caregivers must also consider other factors specific to their individual child and family circumstances in order to make the best decision.

Parents and caregivers should begin leaving children home alone progressively—for only a short time, at first, and stay relatively close to home.

**To help ensure a child's safety when staying at home alone, follow these safety tips:**

- Place all emergency numbers (doctor, hospital, police department, fire department, poison control center, emergency medical services) and the phone number of a friend or neighbor in a visible place near all phones.
- Make sure your child knows your fire escape plans. Remind your child to get out of the house immediately if the smoke alarm sounds and to call the fire department from a neighbor's house.
- Show your child where the first-aid kit is and how to use the items in it.
- Prepare a snack or meal for your child in advance, preferably one that does not need to be heated.
- Tell the child where you will be, how you can be reached, and when you will return home.
- Make sure your child has your cell phone number and/or that it is programmed into the phone he/she would use to call you in an emergency. Knowing your child can reach you in an instant will help you, and your child, feel more at ease.
- If your child arrives home to an empty house, have him or her call you to check-in.
- Set ground rules for:
  - leaving the house
  - having friends over
  - cooking
  - answering the phone/door
  - using the Internet

If self-care is not appropriate for your child at this time, you may want to consider your child care options. Read the Choosing Child Care section of this booklet for information on how to select child care that best meets the needs of your family.

## HERE'S HELP



Use the **Family Resources** on

**pages 91–95** to learn about a variety of family support services available in your community.