

Home alone - is your child ready?

Whether children are home every day after school or once in a while when parents need to run errands, the experience can be made safer and more fun with some of the following tips:

1. Remove fire hazards and install smoke detectors. Hold fire drills with the children "practicing" what they are to do and where they are to go.
2. Teach the children basic first aid and have a first aid kit available.
3. Have the children rehearse emergency (9-1-1) calls giving their full address and directions if necessary.
4. Review safety rules such as not playing with matches, knives, and scissors.
5. Have clear understanding about use of ovens, stoves, and other appliances.
6. It is important that ground rules be established. This avoids confusion about what you expect and adds to the children's own sense of security. Careful planning can help insure physical safety and emotional well-being for your children.
7. Instruct children not to tell callers they are alone. They should say that the parent is busy and offer to take a message. If a call seems suspicious, they should call you or another adult.
8. Warn children never to let strangers into the house.
9. Encourage children to discuss feelings about being alone. If children seem afraid, help them to talk about it and help them feel safe.
10. Set up an emergency plan with a relative, friend, or neighbor who may be unable to care for your children but who would be willing to be called by the children for advice and reassurance in "small emergencies" when you are unavailable by phone.
11. When you leave, post the house address and important phone numbers near the telephone.
12. Establish a daily routine in which your children call you or the designated person when they arrive home.
13. If your children come home after school, give them keys and an attractive key chain. The keys should be carried out of sight so that the children aren't easily identified as ones on their own.
14. Provide at-home projects and materials as well as juice and nutritious snacks.
15. Arrange some after school activities such as clubs, scouts, sports, or library. If you need help with transportation, make arrangements to trade weekend driving or sitting with other parents.
16. Afterward, praise your children for doing a good job. You may be pleasantly surprised at how readily and how well they assume responsibility when prepared and given the opportunity.

There is no magic age when children are ready to stay by themselves. All children are different, but children under 8 years of age should never be left alone. To help you make a decision, consider the following:

1. How do the children feel about the situation?
2. Look at the children's age in relationship to growth, behavior, and judgment.
3. What are the responsibilities with which your children will be left.
4. Will they be able to handle those responsibilities.
5. How long will they be left alone? The first few times should be quite short. You will be able to stay away longer once they feel more confident about their safety.
6. What are the safety risks (fires, accidents, burglaries, etc.) if your children are alone?
7. Can your children say no to peer pressure if friends encourage them to break the rules in your absence?

Source: Florida Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse