

Children Home Alone

When the new school year begins, will your child be among those who are home alone before and/or after school for the first time? Some states regulate the age at which children may be left alone; most do not. If your child demonstrates responsible behavior, sound judgment and sufficient maturity to handle this new responsibility, involve him or her in setting up the procedures to follow. A well developed plan will actually enhance self-esteem as children recognize that parents trust them enough to leave them alone.

- Be sure your child knows his or her formal name, address, phone number, parents' full names, exact names of workplaces, work, cell or pager numbers.
- Print out a phone list of the above information, in case a child gets bewildered during an emergency, plus phone numbers for nearby relatives, friends or neighbors, police, fire and ambulance, and other emergency information. Put the list in several locations within your home.
- Decide whether and where your child will carry a key. If a garage door keypad can be used, it may be easier. Have a back-up plan in case electricity goes out. If using a key, it is wise to leave an extra one with a trusted neighbor.
- Set up a system for your child to check in with a parent after getting in the house safely.
- Establish rules for whether or not your child may leave the house, have friends over to play, cook food, operate appliances, watch television, use the computer.
- Discuss how to handle incoming phone calls. Using caller ID or voice mail to screen the calls will be helpful and protect your child from disclosing to a stranger that no adults are home. If not available, teach your child to tell callers that you can't come to the phone right now rather than that you are not there.
- Agree that your child will not open the door for anyone except a trusted family friend or relative whom he or she feels comfortable being alone with and whose visit has been pre-approved by a parent.
- Set up a plan B. What should your child do if he or she has an unexpected early dismissal, misses the bus or misplaces the key? Enlist the cooperation of a trusted neighbor or friend who is generally home after school and agrees to be a safety net for your child if needed.
- Clarify how time alone will be spent. Are there chores to be finished? Should homework be completed? How will internet safety be maintained? What television channels may be watched? A daily schedule of homework, chores, and activities for your child to follow will be quite helpful.
- Review safety and fire prevention issues: how to deal with a minor cut or bruise, a power failure, plumbing problem or severe weather. Be available to provide help and reassurance, for you are still in charge, even if it is from a distance.



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