

KNOW THE RULES®...

For Children Who Are Home Alone



In today's busy society many children are caring for themselves before or after school and at other times during the day and throughout the year.¹ The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children may be left home alone for brief periods of time without adult supervision beginning in 4th or 5th grade as long as the child is comfortable being home alone.² Many families, however, face situations in which they must leave their children unsupervised for longer periods of time or at even younger ages. According to the National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, most states do not have regulations or laws specifying the age at which a child is considered old enough to stay at home alone. Guidelines or recommendations, in states having them, are most often issued by Child Protective Services (CPS) and administered at the county level. For more specific information about your areas' laws or guidelines, please contact your local CPS agency. If you need help contacting your local CPS agency, call Childhelp® at 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453).³

There are a number of important points families should consider prior to allowing their children to be self-supervised. Parents and guardians need to assess each child. Does he or she have the personality, self-confidence, and judgment skills to accept this responsibility? Will the experience be positive and help build and enhance the child's self-image, or will the experience promote additional anxiety in the child who may be afraid to stay alone? Having a family conference to discuss the arrangement is a good place to start. House rules, expectations of each family member, and a daily routine should be defined. At the end of the day, parents and guardians may also use the experience to have regular family meetings to help ensure the arrangement is still working and identify any needed changes. Here are some steps your family may take to help ensure children have a positive experience when home alone.

Before allowing your child to stay home alone, you should...

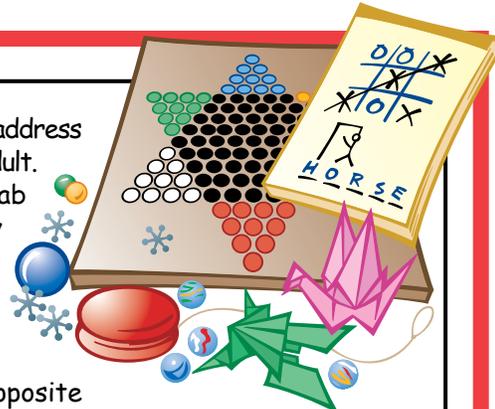
- Determine if there are community resources or organizations providing care or support for children who are home alone.
- Ask your child how he or she feels about being alone. Is your child afraid to be left alone, or does he or she have the maturity and initiative to want to assume that responsibility?
- Decide if you feel your child is able to follow directions and solve problems on his or her own.
- Determine how long your child will be alone, how accessible you or another trusted adult will be in case of an emergency, and the level of safety in your neighborhood. A trusted adult is a person parents/guardians have come to rely on and with whom they and their children feel comfortable. Your local law-enforcement agency may be able to provide information through crime reports including the types and incidence rates of crimes committed in your neighborhood.
- Set specific rules for your child to follow while he or she is alone, and give him or her specific instructions about how to reach you at all times. This should also include information about what to do if your child needs assistance and can't reach you right away.
- Create practice situations for your child showing what he or she may face when home alone including what to do if the telephone rings or the electricity goes out. Make sure your child is able to explain to you the steps he or she would take to safely handle each scenario.
- Remember you're in charge, even if it is from a distance.



If you've decided to allow your child to stay home alone, make sure he or she knows...

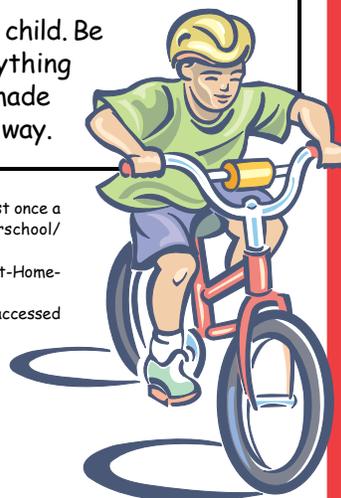
- His or her full name, address, and telephone number.
- Your full name, the exact name of the places where you are when not at home, and all contact information that may be used to reach you when you are not at home.
- Appropriate ways to request help in an emergency using 911 or other emergency number(s) used in your area.

- Appropriate ways to carry his or her key so it is hidden and secure. Your name and address should **not** be on the key, and it may be wise to leave an extra key with a trusted adult.
- Appropriate steps to take if approached or followed. If anyone tries to grab your child, tell him or her to draw attention to him- or herself and loudly yell "This person is trying to take me," or "This person is not my father/mother." Instruct your child to make every effort to escape by walking, running, or pulling away; yelling; kicking; attracting attention; and/or otherwise resisting. Teach your child if he or she is ever followed by someone to get away from that person as quickly as possible. Your child should go in the opposite direction than the one in which that person is traveling and quickly try to get to a spot where a trusted adult may help him or her. Advise your child to tell you or another trusted adult what happened.
- Key safety tips including to
 - Never walk or play alone. Make sure your child knows to always stay in well-lit areas, never take shortcuts, and never go into isolated areas.
 - Always check out the home before entering looking for such things as open, ajar, or broken doors and windows or anything that doesn't look right. Go to a designated safe place to call for help if something doesn't seem right.
 - Always lock the door after entering and make sure the house is secure.
 - Immediately check in with you upon returning home to let you know he or she has arrived safely. If there is a change in plans or your child is running late teach him or her to inform you of that change. Have your child remind you if activities he or she participates in will cause a schedule change.
 - Always tell callers you aren't available to take a telephone call and offer to take a message instead of letting people know he or she is home alone.
 - Never open the door for or talk to anyone who calls or comes to the home unless that person is on a preapproved list of trusted adults you have provided to your child and you have approved the call or visit.
 - Always stay alert for true emergencies such as a fire or gas leak that would require him or her to leave the home.
 - Always check with you or another trusted adult if he or she has doubts about anything.



As a parent or guardian, you should...

- Provide a daily schedule of homework, chores, and activities for your child to follow.
- Keep a list close to the telephone including numbers for you, law enforcement, the fire department, an ambulance service, your doctor, a poison-control center, and a trusted adult who's available in case of an emergency.
 - Provide written instructions about which, if any, appliances may be used; what to do in case of fire; and how to get out of the home if there is a true emergency.
 - Provide a plan in case you are detained and what to do if your child's plans change.
 - Provide instructions about specific activities such as watching television; using a computer, gaming system, or wireless device; talking with others; and having friends in the home when you aren't there.
 - Have a first-aid kit available for your child in case of injuries. Talk with your child about the supplies in the first-aid kit and how to safely use them.
 - Make time to discuss the day's events with your child. Be sure your child knows it is OK to discuss anything with you, especially something that may have made him or her feel sad, scared, or confused in any way.



¹According to the National Center for Education Statistics 17 percent of kindergarteners through eighth graders spend time after school in self-care at least once a week. *After-School Programs & Activities: 2005*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, May 2006. www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/afterschool/tables/table_2.asp, accessed March 15, 2011.

²Emily Harris, "Safe at Home (Alone)," *Healthy Children Magazine*, August 2010. www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/pages/Safe-at-Home-Alone.aspx, accessed March 15, 2011.

³*Leaving Your Child Home Alone*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007. www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/homealone.cfm, accessed March 15, 2011.

1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)

www.missingkids.com

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