

# Leaving Your Child Home Alone

Many parents and other caregivers think about allowing their child or youth to stay at home alone. A parent may need to do this to take a trip to the store or work during the evenings. Before leaving a child or youth home alone, parents and other caregivers must be confident the child or youth has the necessary skills and maturity to handle staying home alone safely. This can be a great opportunity for children and youth to develop their confidence, independence, and sense of responsibility. Still, it also comes with risks, and parents should consider their child's comfort level and ability to handle potential challenges. This factsheet offers guidance to help parents and other caregivers<sup>1</sup> make this important decision.

<sup>1</sup> For the rest of this publication, “parents” refers to all adults with caregiving responsibilities for a child.

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## WHAT TO CONSIDER BEFORE LEAVING YOUR CHILD HOME ALONE

When deciding whether to leave your child home alone, you will want to consider the laws and policies in your State regarding this issue; your child's physical, mental, and emotional well-being; their maturity; and their willingness to stay home alone. There are many resources you can review before making a decision. (See the end of this factsheet for examples.) The following presents more information to help guide you in making this decision.

### STATE LAWS

Parents should review their State and local laws when deciding if it is appropriate to leave their child home alone. Many States' child protection laws classify "failing to provide adequate supervision of a child" as child neglect. But in most cases, States do not define what is considered "adequate supervision." In some States, leaving a child without supervision at an inappropriate age or in inappropriate circumstances may be considered neglect after considering factors that may put the child at risk of harm. These factors could include the child's age, mental ability, and physical condition; the length of the parent's absence; and the home environment or neighborhood conditions.

To see the relevant laws in your State or other States, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway's [State Statutes Search](#) page. To see a summary of State laws defining child maltreatment, read [Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect](#). You can also contact your local child protective services agency for more information.

If you are concerned about a child or youth who may be inadequately supervised, call the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 800.4.A.CHILD (800.422.4453) or visit its [website](#) for further guidance. If a child is unsafe, you can also contact your [local child protective services agency](#).

Many States offer guidance for parents that can help them determine when it's appropriate to leave their child home alone. Some of these guidelines offer advice on appropriate ages for when and how long a child may be left alone, with increasing times based on the child's age and level of maturity.

## AGE AND MATURITY

There is no universally agreed-upon age when a child or youth can stay home alone safely. Because children and youth mature at different rates, parents should not base their decision on age alone. Instead, also evaluate your child's maturity and how they have shown responsible behavior in the past. The following questions may help:

- Is your child capable of taking care of themselves both physically and emotionally? For example, can your child do basic self-care tasks such as bathing, dressing, and feeding themselves without help? Are they able to recognize and express when they are feeling unwell, anxious, or stressed, and do they know how to cope or who to reach out to for support?
- Does your child obey rules and make good decisions? For instance, if you set a curfew, does your child come home on time? If faced with peer pressure to do something risky, do they choose to make good decisions?
- Does your child feel comfortable or fearful about being home alone? For example, if you step out to run a quick errand and leave your child at home, do they remain calm, or do they call you anxiously until you return?

If your child has a developmental or intellectual disability and cannot stay home alone, you can contact organizations in your community, such as [The Arc](#), that serve this population or your State or local developmental disabilities agency. Tell them what kind of care you need and get a list of providers that may be able to help, such as visiting nurses, child care centers, and sleepaway camps. These are supervised options that support independence while maintaining safety and well-being.

## CIRCUMSTANCES

When and how long a child is left home alone can make a difference in their success. You may want to consider the following questions:

- How long and how frequently will your child be left home alone? Will it be during the day, evening, or overnight? Will the child need to eat while you're gone? If so, can food be prepared without using a stove (to minimize the risk of fires or burns)?
- How many children are being left home alone? Children who seem ready to stay home alone may not be ready to care for younger siblings or siblings who have disabilities or specific care needs.
- Is your home free of hazards? Examples of hazards include nonworking smoke alarms or improperly stored cleaning chemicals, medication, alcohol, or firearms.
- Is there a high incidence of crime in the neighborhood?
- Does your child know how to lock or secure the doors? Does your child have a key to your home or a plan if they get locked out?
- Does your child know what to do if someone comes to the door?
- Can you or a trusted nearby adult (for example, a friend, family member, or neighbor) be easily contacted to offer immediate help if there is an emergency or if your child becomes fearful?

## SAFETY SKILLS

In addition to age and maturity, your child will need to master some specific skills before being able to stay home alone. They need to know what to do and whom to contact in an emergency. This information should be written so the child can understand it and stored in an easily accessible place, such as on your refrigerator. It's also useful for your child to know some basic first aid, such as how to check for breathing, help someone who is choking, and treat a burn. Consider enrolling your child in a safety course, like the one offered by the [American Red Cross](#). Make sure there is easy access to first aid supplies at home in case they are needed. The following questions also may help guide your decision:

- Does your family have a safety plan for emergencies? Can your child follow this plan?
- Does your child know their full name, address, and phone number?
- Does your child know where you are and how to contact you?
- Does your child know other trusted adults' full names and contact information? Do they know to call 911 in an emergency?

The American Red Cross created a [pediatric first aid reference guide](#) and [safety tips](#) outlining steps parents, children, and youth can take to make being home alone safer and less stressful.

## YOUTH BABYSITTING OTHER CHILDREN

In households with more than one child or youth, there are several important factors that parents should take into account when deciding whether a child or youth is ready to stay home alone and supervise another child or sibling. An important consideration to address is your child's experience and comfort level regarding being home alone, in addition to the following:

- Are they comfortable being in charge?
- Are they able to calmly handle emergencies or other problems that arise?
- Are they willing to be responsible for the safety of other children?

Other things to consider are the ages of the younger children, sibling or other dynamics, and if the other children and youth have disabilities or specific care needs.

Remember, each child and youth is unique, and the decision to let a preteen or teen babysit should be based on individual circumstances and the child or youth's maturity level. Always prioritize the safety and well-being of the children involved. If your child will be supervising siblings or other children, consider having them take a babysitting course as well as a first aid and CPR course, such as those offered by the [American Red Cross](#).

## COMMUNICATION

There are various communication tools that can promote safety and maintain contact when leaving your child home alone. Cell phones enable children to reach parents or emergency services and may include location-tracking features. Virtual check-ins through video calls (like Facetime) or messaging provide additional communication options.

But it's important to remember that technology should complement the safeguards in place for your child, not replace them. Even with video calls, trackers, and other smart devices, parents will need to teach their child how to be responsible, independent, and safe, especially while at home alone. Communication and trust are key in promoting a child or youth's well-being and building their confidence. With cell phones becoming the most common way to communicate and landlines growing scarcer, families without landlines must consider alternative means for their child's communication, especially during an emergency where cellular communication may become disrupted.

You should also set family rules for the use of technology, such as social media and the internet, to keep children and youth safe online, especially when you're not home to supervise them. It is key to teach children and youth about safe internet behaviors, including not giving out personal information and being cautious when communicating with people in a chat room or on social media. For more information on youth and social media, see [Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers](#).

### Can Foster Parents Leave Children and Youth in Foster Care Home Alone?

Foster parents may need to account for additional factors when deciding whether to leave a child or youth in their care home alone. Federal law regarding foster care includes the [reasonable and prudent parent standard](#), which allows foster parents greater discretion in making decisions regarding the daily activities of the children and youth in their care. This standard was developed to encourage normalcy (for example, being allowed to sleep over at a friend's house, getting a driver's license) and to allow these children and youth the same opportunities and experiences as children and youth not in foster care, including the chance to be home alone. As with any child or youth, these decisions must be balanced with ensuring their safety and well-being, as children and youth in foster care may have additional needs or vulnerabilities that must be considered. Many States provide guidelines for foster parents about leaving their child or youth home alone. For specific guidance, foster parents should consult with their caseworker, who can provide information tailored to the child or youth's specific situation and the local regulations or guidelines.

## TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Once you have determined that your child is ready to stay home alone, the following suggestions may help you prepare your child as well as help you feel more comfortable about leaving them home alone:

- **Have a trial period and start small.** When your child is ready, leave them home alone for a short time while staying close to home. This is a good way to see how they will manage.
- **Talk about it beforehand.** Encourage your child to share their feelings with you about staying home alone and address any thoughts or concerns they may have before leaving them home alone.
- **Teach them about safety.** Before leaving your child home alone, make sure they are mature enough to handle the responsibility and understand the safety rules. Develop a family emergency plan to help them handle those situations, such as what to do in case of a fire, power outage, or stranger approaching the house. Practice basic first aid and teach them what to do if they have to contact emergency services, perhaps including a role play.
- **Establish family rules and set boundaries.** Set clear guidelines about what your child can and cannot do while home alone. Establish rules for screen time, internet usage, and the use of kitchen appliances or any other potentially dangerous items.
- **Don't overdo it.** Avoid leaving your child at home alone overnight or for overly frequent periods of time. Consider other options or resources, such as family or friends or programs offered by their school, community centers, youth organizations, or faith-based groups, to help with supervising your child.
- **Follow up.** After your child is left home alone (including during any trial period), talk about the experience with them. How did they feel about it? Were they nervous? Did anything unexpected come up? If they were watching another child, ask how they felt about doing so.

### Leaving Your Child Home Alone Overnight

It is generally recommended that parents should avoid letting their teen stay home alone overnight until their late teens, although this choice might vary depending on the teen's level of maturity.

Consider the following questions to help make this decision:

- How has your teen handled being alone in the past?
- Does your teen show the ability to resist peer pressure?
- Is your teen likely to be fearful?
- How consistently does your teen follow the rules?
- Is there a responsible adult nearby who can help your teen if an emergency comes up or the teen feels uncomfortable being alone overnight?
- Will your teen be responsible for watching a sibling, too? Are both comfortable with being home alone overnight without an adult present?

## CONCLUSION

The decision to leave your child home alone depends on many factors, and the decision that's best for one family may be different for another family. If you're in doubt about what to do, talk with family, friends, or a professional (like your child's pediatrician) to get advice or consult your State or local government's guidelines. Ultimately, your child's safety—and their comfort level with being alone—should be the primary consideration when making this decision.

## RESOURCES

The following are additional resources that can help you decide whether you should leave your child home alone and prepare your child for that experience:

- [Is Your Child Ready to Stay Home Alone?](#) (also in [Spanish](#)) (American Academy of Pediatrics)
- [Leaving Your Child Home Alone](#) (also in [Spanish](#)) (KidsHealth)
- [Safety Steps to Follow if Kids Are Home Alone](#) (American Red Cross)

### SUGGESTED CITATION:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2023). *Leaving your child home alone*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/leaving-your-child-home-alone/>



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Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau



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