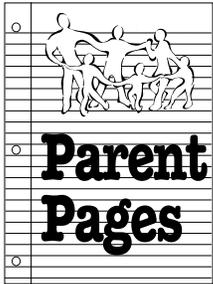


When Can Children Be Left Home Alone?

No one can know for sure when children can be left safely at home alone. Unfortunately, age is not an accurate predictor of maturity, common sense or good judgment. A few children may be able to manage on their own around age 10, while many others need supervision well into their teens.



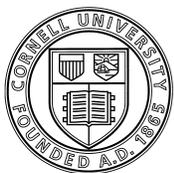
Occasionally, adults make inappropriate, even dangerous decisions about leaving

children to care for themselves, as we have seen in the widely publicized case of parents on vacation while their 9 and 4-year-old daughters were home alone. For the most part, however, parents struggle to be caring and responsible, even when under great stress. The following questions help parents make sensible decisions about their children's welfare and whereabouts when school is not in session.



1. Do the children want to be left alone?
2. Are they capable of caring for themselves?
3. Do you live in a safe, friendly neighborhood?
4. Is there an adult (neighbor, friend or relative) available in case of an emergency?
5. Have you checked your home for hazards and made necessary household repairs?
6. Have you and the children discussed and practiced what to do if...
 - a smoke detector goes off
 - they suspect fire
 - someone comes to the door
 - the phone rings
 - there is a power outage
 - the furnace goes off
 - there is a plumbing leak
 - they get hurt or become ill?
7. Will the children have a telephone available, know how to use it and have emergency numbers posted by every phone? Do they know how to contact you when you are not at home?
8. Have you established clear rules about safety, television use, chores, homework, snacks, and visits by friends and visits to friends?
9. Do you feel confident that children will abide by these rules even when you are not there to enforce them?
10. If you have more than one child, are you sure siblings will not tease, frighten or hurt each other?
11. Will children be able to play safely outside around the house?

~Continued~



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12. Have you researched community programs like school-age child care programs or after-school activities in community centers and found no options available to you?
13. Are you completely comfortable about leaving your children alone after you consider their maturity and judgment, their ability to take care of and protect themselves, and the safety of your home and neighborhood?

If you have answered "yes" to these questions, then your children may be ready to be home alone. Test the situation before making a long-time arrangement. For example, leave the children for short periods while you visit a neighbor or go to the store. It's easier to move children from supervision to independence than to let them try to be on their own, find it doesn't work, then insist on supervision.

If you are uneasy or have doubts, try to arrange for supervision in your home or in an established after-school program. If there are no existing programs, you may want to

get together with other parents to start one. Perhaps you can hire a responsible teenager to take your child to the library, park or community events for part of every afternoon or several times per week.

Being "home alone" inevitably creates some anxiety and stress for families. Adults have a difficult time deciding when their children are ready for self-care - or when they, as responsible parents, must insist that the children attend a child care program or be supervised by an older person. The only sure rule is that age is only one factor to be considered when making this decision.

Source: Jennifer Birkemayer, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, NYS College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County

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