

Talk about Safety

Teach your child these safety measures for every day:

- How to come home safely and lock the door.
- How to operate the home security system, if you have one.
- How to check in with you or a responsible adult when they get home.
- How to answer the telephone. They should not tell a caller that you are not home.
- What to do if someone comes to the door.

Teach your child what to do in an emergency:

- Fire - plan an escape route and practice using it. Tell your child to leave the house first, and call the fire department from a neighbor's home later.
- Injury - teach your child basic first aid and when to call for help.
- Bad weather - plan and practice what to do if the electricity goes out, and where to go if there's a severe weather warning.
- Any change in routine - plan and practice what to do if school lets out early or if neighbors aren't home. Also, children should be taught to contact an adult and report a problem even if they feel they can handle it on their own.

Try out self-care on a trial basis to see how well it works and to make sure your child likes the new arrangement. If you're confident your child will be safe and will make wise choices while you're not home, you will feel good about self-care. If you don't think your child is ready to stay home alone regularly, you'll want to look for a good after-school care program. Your local county Department of Social Services and local child care services can help you locate programs for older children.

Remember that assuring your child's readiness for self-care is an ongoing process. From time to time you'll want to review how well self-care is working out for you and your child.

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North Carolina Pediatric Society
State Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics

HOME SAFE SERIES



Is Your Child Ready to Stay Home Alone?

Assessing Your Child's Readiness for Self-care

A resource guide for working parents sponsored by the Committee on Child Abuse & Neglect of the North Carolina Pediatric Society

Is Your Child Ready to Stay Alone?

There is no magic age when children develop the maturity and good sense they need to stay home alone. Some children display these abilities around age 12, or even sooner; others do so when they're older. Think about the questions below to help decide if your child is ready to stay home alone. Then, if you think they're ready, read on to learn how to help prepare your child.

How Mature is Your Child?

1. Does my child want to be home alone?
2. Does my child follow directions? Exercise self-control?
3. Can my child tell an emergency from a non-emergency?
4. Does he or she seek help when a problem arises that needs adult assistance?
5. Is my child overly fearful?
6. Does my child have a concept of time?
7. Has my child been involved in drugs, alcohol, shoplifting, setting fires, or other behaviors of concern?
8. Is there a different child care arrangement that my child might prefer?

Problem Solving/Communication Skills

1. Can my child think logically and is he/she able to problem solve?
2. Can my child recall events and explain situations that we experience together?
3. Does my child listen to and speak with other adults, such as the neighbors?
4. Is my child able to share feelings, concerns, and activities, both good and bad, with me?
5. Can my child say, "No" to an adult who may want to come into the house?
6. Can my child refuse to answer personal questions if asked by an adult?



Health Concerns

1. Are there any medical conditions that could make staying home alone dangerous for my child?
2. Does my child have the physical coordination to move in and around the house without getting hurt?

Things to Think About

Do you feel comfortable about your child staying alone?

Even if your child does seem mature enough for self-care, you'll need to think about some other factors: are your home and neighborhood safe?

How long will your child be alone each day?

Many children do best in self-care when they're not home alone for more than an hour or so at a time. However, this varies for different children and different settings. You will need to decide if the time alone will be too much, based on your child and setting.

Is there a responsible adult nearby where your child can go for help?

Your child will need a designated adult he or she can telephone when feeling frightened or lonely, or for help in an emergency. Your child will need a safe place to go in case of a lost key or other emergency.

Do you have more than one child who will be at home alone?

Children caring for siblings need to be even older and more mature than other children ready for self-care. The younger siblings need to be comfortable about staying home without an adult.

Are there medical conditions or special needs that could make staying home alone dangerous for my child?

Self-care may not be good idea if your child has special needs.

Is your family going through a difficult transition period due to a recent move, death, divorce or remarriage?

Self-care may not be a good idea if your child is adjusting to new family circumstances.

Are you ready to give your child more independence and freedom?

Consider having your child take a baby-sitter certification class such as those offered by the American Red Cross.

Teach Your Child What He/She Needs to Know

If both you and your child seem ready for self-care, you'll want to start preparing your child. You'll need to teach him or her certain skills, and you'll need to develop rules and schedules.

Be sure your child knows:

- Important names and telephone numbers. Post a list of numbers by the telephone. Include a way for your child to reach you, as well as a nearby adult and to call 9-1-1.
- When you'll be home.
- How to use the telephone. Your child needs to know and practice how to make a call, answer a call, and write a message.
- How to dial 9-1-1 in an emergency.
- How to enter and exit the house. Your child must be able to keep track of his or her keys and know how to lock and unlock doors easily. Your child must be able to operate the home security system.
- What appliances to use and how to use them. Your child must know what appliances you have approved for his or her use while home alone and how to operate them safely.
- Where to go for help. Your child needs an adult who lives or works nearby who'll help in case of an emergency or lost key.
- Which friends – if any- can come to the home when there is no adult present.
- What child is allowed to do - and NOT to do - when they are alone.

Make directions clear and simple. As you talk with your child, explain one thing at a time. Write important things down. Test your child on the rules and procedures for when they are alone.