



Children Home Alone

Parents usually wonder if it is okay to have that lag time between the child returning from school and the parent returning from work being unsupervised. In some cases, parents would like to know if it is okay to once again go out in the evenings and leave the children behind unsupervised. At the same time, these times are then marred by parental nervousness and worst case scenario thinking, causing the parent to cut short meetings or dates and rush home, only to find junior happily munching on some chips.

Here are some things to consider when deciding if your child is old enough to be home alone without a sitter:

- Generally speaking, a child must be 12 years of age or older before you are legally permitted to leave him home alone for any period of time. In some states and municipalities this may be different, and before you even consider doing so, check with your local law enforcement agency to know the laws.
- Your child needs to be responsible. Age does not matter, if your child is not responsible enough to know that he needs to sit down and start on his homework rather than playing video games. Additionally, does your child have good judgment and reasoning abilities, making it possible for him to remember not to open the door when the doorbell chimes, or not let a stranger on the phone know that you are not there?
- Does your child want to be left home alone? Some children are afraid, even if they are legally and otherwise ready to stay home alone. Do not force your child into this until he is sure that he is ready.
- How are siblings getting along? If you have an older child who likes to torment a younger one or vice versa, this is a recipe for disaster if you put the older child in charge. There is always a bit of bickering, but if the bickering is more or less physical fighting, this is a bad idea.
- Is your home safe? If you live in a safe neighborhood, your windows and doors are in good repair, and your child knows how to work the burglar alarm and call the authorities if necessary, you could say that it is by and large safe for your child to be home alone. On the other hand, if your home is near to venues that attract unsafe characters and if your neighborhood is prone to gang violence, leaving your child home alone is unwise.

•Have you trained your child in proper safety procedures? In other words, does your child know what to do if there was an attempted break-in, a fire, or other emergency?

If you answered yes to all of these questions and you believe that you and your child are ready to move into this next phase of the parent and child relationship, follow these simple steps to make this a positive and rewarding experience.

1.Start small. At first, leave your child alone for 30 minutes while you walk the dog. Gradually increase the amount of time to an hour. Over time, keep increasing the amount of time so that the child may explore his own comfort levels.

2.Reiterate the rules. Your child must be clear on the house rules and on the expectations you have when he is home alone. This may include responsibility for younger siblings, the notion that homework is to be started at a certain time, the rule that friends of the opposite sex may not visit in your absence, and a host of other do's and don'ts.

3.Prepare for emergencies. Your child must know what to do. If he is to be in charge of younger siblings, he needs to know infant and child CPR. Sign up for a class together. Additionally, your child needs to know how to operate a fire extinguisher, dial 9-1-1, and also give succinct instructions to emergency personnel who answer the telephone. Moreover, make sure your child has your mobile number and the numbers of other adults for backup.

4.Model what being home alone is all about. Your child should know what to do in several scenarios, such as losing a house key, having a stranger come to the door, getting hungry, needing help with homework, having you or the other parent running late, answering the telephone, and also dealing with getting lonely.

5.Prepare siblings for the inevitable power games. If you anticipate the squabbles and problems before they occur, you can most likely prevent a lot of bickering. Identify who is supposed to do what, who is in charge of what and of whom, and also who the ultimate authority is to make that phone call to you when all else fails.