

# Building Strong Families

## Family Decision Making Tools

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### The Family Decision

Self-care is a family matter. The decision to begin self-care cannot be made only by parents or only by the child. It must be a joint decision to which all parties agree.

#### Parental Attitudes

Parents must continually monitor child-care arrangements. They should listen carefully to their children, consult with them and make changes in the arrangement when necessary. Children who freely discuss problems and fears with mom and dad do so because they feel loved. These children will probably feel secure when staying alone.

When parents let their children know they are proud of them and have confidence in them, the children are better able to handle the job of caring for themselves. Parents who decide that children will stay alone, like it or not, may meet resistance. They may also find themselves uneasy about the child's behavior when left alone.

#### Parental Feelings

Parents who feel trapped into leaving their children in self-care by the lack of alternatives may experience tension, uneasiness and guilt feelings. Children are affected by their parents' feelings and may experience an exaggerated sense of discomfort or fear when home alone. Talking things over with your partner and/or children and helping your children prepare for this experience may help reduce some of these concerns.

How can you tell if your child is ready? First, your child should indicate a desire and willingness to stay alone. Children who are easily frightened or who do not want to stay alone are probably not ready for this responsibility. In addition, your child should accept responsibility, be aware of the needs of others, and should be able to consider alternatives and make decisions on their own.

**Do your children:**

- get ready for school on time?
- solve problems on their own?
- complete homework and household chores with a minimum of supervision?
- remember to tell you where they are going and when they will be back?

These are some of the skills they will need to care for themselves. For many children these abilities begin to appear between 10-12 years. A child younger than 9 or 10 years of age probably should not be left alone. Finally, your child should be able to talk easily with you about interests and concerns. Good parent-child communication ensures that any fears or problems that arise because of staying alone can be quickly discussed and dealt with.

**Several other factors must also enter into your decision.**

- What is your neighborhood like?
- Are adults available nearby?
- How long will your child be alone?

If your neighborhood is unsafe, if there are no adults nearby to call in case of emergency, or if your child must remain alone for a very long time, it is best to continue to use some other form of child care even if your child seems ready to stay alone.

**Prepare your child to stay alone.**

When you and your child agree that self-care is appropriate, begin to provide your child with the knowledge and training needed for self-care.

When teaching your children, give information gradually rather than all at once. Too much information at one time is difficult to remember.

Present your children with a number of situations, and have them act out their responses. For example, pretend you are a stranger at the door asking to use the phone, and then pretend you are a salesman wanting to leave free samples.

Giving many examples and having your children respond to the situation will help them respond quickly and flexibly if the situation occurs when they are alone. Simply telling them the information is less effective. It can be quickly forgotten.

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### Is Your Child Responsible in Self-Care?

Children's actions or inactions indicate their capacities and abilities and give clues about the kind of help they need. Reaching maturity is a long, gradual process. Responsible individuals can carry out tasks and answer for their behavior.

The questions below help assess your child's maturity and readiness for self-care. Are you comfortable with your answers? Have your child answer the same questions about himself or herself.

1. **Do your children get to the bus or arrive at school on time?**  
a) rarely      b) sometimes      c) frequently      d) almost always
2. **Do your children get to the return bus or arrive home from school on time?**  
a) rarely      b) sometimes      c) frequently      d) almost always
3. **Do your children tell you where they're going before they leave home?**  
a) rarely      b) sometimes      c) frequently      d) almost always
4. **Do your children tell the truth about what happens when they are alone?**  
a) rarely      b) sometimes      c) frequently      d) almost always
5. **Do your children complete chores?**  
a) rarely      b) sometimes      c) frequently      d) almost always
6. **Can your children solve problems on their own?**  
a) rarely      b) sometimes      c) frequently      d) almost always
7. **Do your children know when to ask for help?**  
a) rarely      b) sometimes      c) frequently      d) almost always
8. **Do your children cooperate with each other? Do they obey the sibling placed "in charge?"**  
a) rarely      b) sometimes      c) frequently      d) almost always
9. **Do your children openly discuss feelings they have about staying alone?**  
a) rarely      b) sometimes      c) frequently      d) almost always

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### The Parent and Child Decision

Both parents and children can benefit from working together on these activities. Children often find that giving a name to a feeling is difficult.

#### How do you feel about self-care?

**Children:** Put a star by the feelings you have when you are alone in the house. You may experience many of these feelings over time. Now circle the one or two ways you feel most of the time while home alone.

afraid	busy	sad	proud
bored	angry	in charge	worried
angry	happy	relaxed	brave
lonely	smart	safe	upset

**Parents:** Now talk with your children about the reasons they may be having these feelings. Check for understanding by telling them what you hear them saying.

**Complete the following sentences, and exchange your thoughts and ideas.**

#### **Child:**

1. When I'm at home alone, I really like to \_\_\_\_\_
2. When I'm by myself, I sometimes feel \_\_\_\_\_
3. When I'm home by myself, I wish \_\_\_\_\_
4. When I'm by myself, the worst thing is \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Parent:**

1. When you're at home alone, I \_\_\_\_\_
2. I'm proud of you when \_\_\_\_\_
3. When I am not with you, I wish you would \_\_\_\_\_

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### Am I Really Ready?

You may sometimes be at home without a parent or adult. You may be totally alone or in charge of younger brothers or sisters. This is a big responsibility, and you need to know how to act in an emergency, how to deal with phone calls and strangers, and how to manage time.

With your parents, review the items below. Check things you can already do. As you learn a new skill, check it off until you have checked every item on this page.

#### I can...

- Lock and unlock doors and windows.
- Tell time.
- Give my name, address and directions to my home.
- Give my telephone number.
- Explain how I would handle first aid for cuts and scrapes, burns, nose bleeds, poisoning, bites, choking and eye injuries.
- Find the first-aid supplies.
- Identify two escape routes from my home in case of a fire.
- Show my parents how I can correctly handle telephone calls.
- Show my parents how I handle strangers at the door.
- Explain how to reach my parents by telephone or radio.
- Name two adults to contact in an emergency.
- Identify a safe place to seek shelter during a storm.
- Name five household rules and say which ones were followed last week.
- Give an example of when I had to decide what was the right thing to do.
- Give a recent example of when my parents helped me solve a problem.
- Explain to my parents what I will do if I am bored or lonely.
- Show my parents what I do when I get home in the afternoon.
- Fix my family three snack foods by myself.

**Parent note:** You may base your child's self-care decision on need, finances or the child's maturity. *Safety, however, must be your number one concern.*