

When is Home Alone Okay?

Have you ever wondered why the work day usually ends between four and five o'clock at night and your children get out of school around two or three o'clock? Parents are too often left with a decision about what to do with their child during the after school time. A good after school program or childcare is hard to find, especially one that is open and affordable to the average family. Often children are left alone for two to three hours after school by themselves. As parents it is hard to know when it is okay to leave your child at home alone in after school situations or anytime you are not at home.

Unfortunately, circumstances force us to make this choice before we have had a chance to consider all the issues to make a judgment. There are a variety of things to consider when deciding if you should leave your child at home. Before you make this important decision consider the following questions:

First – How mature is my child? Children vary widely in their ability to follow directions, occupy themselves, cope sensibly with unexpected situations, and resist temptation. Generally speaking, many ten-year-olds are ready to handle being alone for short periods of time—an hour or so. Age alone, however, is not a reliable guide.

Second – How safe and familiar is my neighborhood? A family neighbor willing to check on the child or be available can ease your mind and be a sense of security for the child. If one is not available, you may want to rethink your decision to leave your child alone.

If you consider these factors and decide it is okay to leave your child at home alone, begin to prepare your child in advance. Establish clear rules and specific routines. Discuss with your child: whether friends are allowed in the house, can they go outside, how far from home can they venture, time limits for telephone conversations, video game usage, appropriate television shows to watch, and acceptable snacks.

With the child, make a schedule of activities and post it on the refrigerator. Review important telephone numbers and post them next to the schedule. Review safety rules. Try to do this in a way that does not leave your child fearful or overly anxious. Rather than cautionary tales about terrible things that may happen, teach a few basic rules about what to do in particular situations like: when the doorbell rings; when an unknown person calls on the telephone; if a fire breaks out.

When the time comes, help your child feel connected to you. Leave a special message or snack surprise to let them know they are in your thoughts while you are away from home. Begin with short intervals of absence. Run an errand or visit a neighbor the first few times you leave your child alone. Gradually increase the frequency and length of your absences.

Finally, here are a couple of reminders about leaving your children alone. A determination that your child is mature enough to be left alone for an hour or two does not mean that they are ready to be left in charge of a younger sibling. Remember that no child under the age of 15 should be left alone for extended periods of time, particularly at night.

For more information about this topic or other youth development issues please contact Sarah Staude, 4-H Youth Specialist, University of Missouri Extension in Henry County at 660-885-5556.