Building Strong Families

Helping Families Decide about Self-Care

How a Family Decides

Self-care is a family matter. Both the parents and the child must decide when the time is right for self-care. Both the parents and the child must agree.

How Parents Feel

Parents must keep checking on child-care plans. They should listen carefully to their children, talk about plans with them, and change plans when needed. If children feel loved, they can freely talk about problems and fears with Mom and Dad. These children will probably feel safe when staying alone.

Parents need to let their children know that they are proud of them and trust them. Then children can do better at caring for themselves. If parents decide that children will stay alone whether they like it or not, their children may fight them. Those parents may also worry about what their children may do when left alone.

Some parents feel trapped. They think that they have no choice but to let their children care for themselves. These parents may feel tense, worried, and guilty. Children often pick up on those feelings. Then the children may feel even more worried or scared about being home alone. If parents talk things over with their partner and/or their children, this will help children prepare for being home alone. It will also make parents less worried.

How can you tell when your children are ready? First, children should tell you that they want to stay alone. Children who are often scared or who do not want to stay alone are probably not ready to do it. Also, children should be able to take responsibility for what they do. They should think about the needs of others. Finally, children should be able to think about different choices and decide many things on their own.
Ask yourself: Do your children…

- get ready for school on time?
- solve problems on their own?
- do homework and household chores without you having to check on them?
- tell you where they are going and when they will be back?

These are some skills children will need in order to care for themselves. Most children begin to build these skills between ages 10-12. A child younger than 9 or 10 probably should not be left alone. Finally, your child should feel free to talk with you about interests and concerns. If parents and children communicate well, they can talk about and deal with any fears or problems about staying alone.

Answer some other questions before you decide.

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

If your neighborhood is not safe, if there are no adults nearby to call in an emergency, or if your child must stay alone for a very long time, it is best not to leave your child alone. Even if your child seems ready to stay alone, keep using some other form of childcare. Remember that safety should be your biggest concern when you decide about your child’s self-care. It is more important than need, money, or your child’s maturity.
Prepare your child to stay alone.

When you and your child agree that your child is ready for self-care, start teaching your child what he or she needs to know and do.

When you teach, give your child information little by little, not all at once. Too much information at one time is hard to remember.

Give your children a number of situations that could happen, and have them act out what they would do. For example, pretend you are a stranger at the door asking to use the phone. Then pretend you are a salesman wanting to leave free samples. Just telling them what to do is not as helpful as having them act out different situations. This practice will help them act quickly and wisely if situations like those happen when they are on their own.
Is Your Child Responsible in Self-Care?

What children do or don’t do shows their skills and abilities and gives you clues about the help they need. It takes a long time for children to become mature. Responsible people carry out tasks and answer for their behavior.

The questions below can help you decide if your child is mature enough to be ready for self-care. Are you comfortable with your answers? After you answer, 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 finish 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 help each other? Do they obey the brother or sister placed "in charge"?**
   a) rarely  
   b) sometimes  
   c) frequently  
   d) almost always 

9. **Do your children tell you openly the feelings they have about staying alone?**
   a) rarely  
   b) sometimes  
   c) frequently  
   d) almost always
Parents and Children Decide

Both parents and children are helped when they work together on these activities. Children often find that giving a name to a feeling is hard.

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 have many of these feelings for just part of the time. Now circle the one or two ways you feel most of the time when you are 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 why they may be having these feelings. Check to see if you understand your children by telling them what you hear them saying.
Finish the following sentences. Then talk about 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 __________________________
Am I Really Ready?

Sometimes you may be home without a parent or adult. You may be all alone or in charge of younger brothers or sisters. This is a big job. 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 off things you can already do. As you learn a new skill, check it off until you have checked off every item.

I can...

☑ Lock and unlock doors and windows.
☑ Tell time.
☑ Give my name, address, and directions to my home.
☑ Give my telephone number.
☑ Find the first-aid supplies.
☑ Tell how I would handle first aid for cuts and scrapes, burns, nosebleeds, poisoning, bites, choking, and eye injuries.
☑ Point out two ways to get out of my home in case of a fire.
☑ Show my parents how I can handle telephone calls the right way.
☑ Show my parents how I handle strangers at the door.
☐ Explain on the telephone how to reach my parents.

☐ Name two adults to contact in an emergency (contact persons).

☐ Find a safe place for 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 the right thing to do.

☐ Give a recent example of when my parents helped me solve a problem.

☐ Tell 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 three snack foods for my family by myself.