

Is Your Child Ready to Be Home Alone?

by Katy Fuller

Are you thinking of having your child stay [home alone](#) for a couple of hours each day?

When is it okay? What are the [local laws](#) surrounding the ages that children can stay alone or with their siblings? The answers vary depending on family culture and traditions, an individual child's development and temperament, parents' own levels of comfort, and the community in which the family lives.

If you are wondering whether or not your children are old enough to be left alone, first call Department of Human Services: Child Welfare Services at 1-800-556-6616 to find out the minimum legal age at which they can be on their own or caring for younger children. The number for Lane County is 541-686-7555. According to a screener, a child must be 10 years old to stay at home alone. In addition to these ages, however, the answers to the following [important questions](#) need to be considered:

- Does my child have any physical or mental health conditions or behavior issues?
- Is my child able to stay clear-headed in an unexpected emergency situation?
- Can my child calmly dial 911, give her or his full name and explain the situation?
- Is my home safe from dangers and hazards; e.g., swimming pool, guns, poison, etc.?
- Does my child follow my instructions and my rules?
- Can I count on my child to tell me the truth?
- How does my child feel about staying at home alone?
- Does my child feel frightened or apprehensive about staying at home alone?

Talk to your children to prepare them and to develop a plan that addresses issues or potential problems that may arise. In addition, strive to make your [home as safe as possible](#) from obvious dangers and hazards and rehearse the developed "emergency plan" with your children.

The movie "Home Alone" and its sequels have portrayed a child's survival skills in a humorous and unrealistic manner. The realities facing children who find themselves home alone are very different. Most children are inadequately prepared to avoid injuries, deal with emergencies, handle phone calls or visitors at the door. Teaching them what to say or do and rehearsing with them will make your child and you more confident knowing that your child has the knowledge to deal with issues that may come up.

Many [issues and potential risks](#) need to be considered before you place your children in this situation:

- Make sure they have a key. You don't want them trying to slip through a window. They must be able to keep track of a key, know how to lock and unlock doors easily, and

get into the home quickly and lock the door behind them. Instruct them not to enter the house if the door is open, unlocked, or if anything seems unusual.

- Designate a responsible adult who would be accessible by phone or lives a short distance from your home for children to check in with at intervals. Ask them to call you or the designated adult as soon as they get home from school.
- Instruct them to come right home unless other plans have been agreed upon. You can never reiterate this enough: tell them to never accept a ride from a stranger and to not tell strangers they're going to be home alone.
- Sit down with them and make a list of people who are allowed over when they are home alone.
- Tell them never to play with dangerous items such as weapons, power tools and barbecue grills. Make sure all firearms are securely locked away.
- Install a peephole at their eye level. Instruct them to look through the peephole to see who is at the door when the doorbell rings and to open the door only if the person is on the approved list. Some families have a rule to not answer the door at all when someone is home alone. Have a family code word.
- Post important phone numbers and special instructions in a central location, such as near the phone or on the fridge. Instruct them to screen calls unless it is someone that knows the family code word. If possible, leave your beeper or cellular phone number. Knowing they can reach you in an instant will help put them and you more at ease.
- Show them where the first aid kit is and how to use the items in it. It is important to have an alternate escape route in case one is blocked by [fire](#). Plan a meeting place outside your home in case of fire.
- Discuss ahead of time what they plan to do when they arrive at home. You should always have a schedule for them and let them know exactly what you expect.

Remember, no matter how mature children act, they are still children. They invariably make mistakes and don't always react in a situation as you wish they would. Even if they start off well without adult supervision, they can get "spooked" and develop real fears about being home alone. Start on a trial, part time basis, if possible. Role-play different situations; e.g., "What would you do if you lost your key? What if a delivery person came to the door? How do you answer the phone?"

You may feel most comfortable starting out with short trial runs, such as leaving your children home alone for 15 minutes or so, and gradually increasing the amount of time they spend alone. Take it slowly, staying within the comfort level of both your children and you.

Give your children lots of encouragement, support, and reinforcement and treat mistakes as learning experiences instead of failures. Tell them how much their helpfulness, self-reliance, and cooperation are appreciated while you are away.

Katy Fuller, is a Parent Consultant at Lane Family Connections of Lane and Douglas Counties. For questions about child care or preschools, or other resources in the community, please visit www.lanecc.edu/lfc or call 541-463-3305.