

Preparing Your Child To Stay Home Alone

Once you have made the decision to allow your child to remain at home alone, there are steps you can take to help make sure your child is safe. By carefully teaching your child how to be left alone and working out solutions to problems in advance, you can prepare him and yourself for this new experience.

Things you can do to help your child:



- ❑ Initially, leave your child for short periods of time to allow him to grow accustomed to being by himself. Gradually lengthen the time as your child gains confidence in himself and his abilities.
- ❑ The adults in your family should talk with the child about his fears and concerns before he is left alone. When warning your child of danger, such as the abductor or intruder, present the discussion in a calm manner, offering realistic solutions or ways of avoidance. For many adults, the fine line between teaching caution and frightening the child is difficult to draw, but a terrified child is not likely to react rationally.
- ❑ Post your telephone number, along with those of relatives, neighbors, and emergency personnel in full view of the telephone. To help the child react swiftly in an emergency, you may want to label the telephone numbers with identifying pictures. For example, the number for the fire department could have a picture of a red fire engine next to it; grandmother's telephone number could be accompanied by her photograph.
- ❑ Post your name and address next to the telephone. If your home is in the country or an isolated area, include directions to your home.
- ❑ Keep a first-aid book by the phone. Having an identical copy of the book at work will enable you to refer to specific first-aid information with your child when minor "emergencies" occur.
- ❑ Plan each day's or evening's routine with your child. Specify plans for transportation and special activities. Include chores as well as play activities in your planning. This not only helps pass the time, but also gives the child a sense of contributing to the family in realistic ways.
- ❑ Have a fire drill. Make sure your child knows the safety procedures to follow if there is a fire in the house.

- ❑ Telephone or have your child call you on a regular, scheduled basis. If you are not available, see if there is a friend or neighbor whom your child could call.
- ❑ If you have a tape recorder, leave a message with instructions. If not, leave a special note to your child in a planned place each day. A written message letting the child know that you are thinking of him can be comforting.
- ❑ Hypothesize about things that could go wrong and brainstorm with your child about solutions. What would you do if your key got lost? the dog got away? the doorbell rang? the furnace turned off? a ball broke the window? You and your child can discuss the best ways to handle each situation. Encourage your child to come up with alternate solutions.
- ❑ Make sure your child knows the safety basics, such as:
 - how to answer the door. When your child is alone in the house, it's best for him not to answer the door. Delivery persons should be directed to a neighbor's or told to come back at another time.
 - how to answer the telephone. Children should never say they are home alone. Instead, teach your child to say, "My mother (father) can't come to the phone right now. Can I take a message?"
 - what to do if she gets home to find the door ajar or a window broken. Your child should never enter the home under unusual or suspicious circumstances, but should instead be taught to go to a trusted neighbor's house and call you.
 - how to call the fire department
 - when to call the doctor
 - how to apply first aid for simple cuts and burns
 - what to do if someone has eaten something poisonous
- ❑ "Safety-proof" your house. Remove potential hazards from reach. This includes poisons, tools, firearms, medicines, and dangerous appliances.
- ❑ Work out an arrangement with a trusted neighbor where your children can go if they're scared or upset.
- ❑ Teach your child how to work the locks and bolts on all doors and windows. They should be kept locked when she is alone in the house.
- ❑ Do not allow your child to go to other people's houses without your permission.
- ❑ Post house and safety rules on the refrigerator . Discuss the rules with your child so he knows and understands them.
- ❑ If there is more than one child, clearly establish who is in charge. Identify what this means, and specify discipline that can be used.

- ❑ Work out a method with your child of taking care of her house key. The fear of losing their keys haunts many self-care children. Children should never display their keys or carry them loosely. Children who wear their keys openly may be inviting trouble. Your child could attach the key to a necklace or lanyard worn underneath his clothing, or use a key ring that clips to a belt loop and can be hidden in a pocket. No matter how careful your child is, he can – like any adult – lose his key. Be sure to discuss with your child what to do if this happens. Never hide an extra key outside the house. A trusted neighbor whom the child has met and feels comfortable approaching should be given an extra key.

- ❑ Remember, you are not the only one who is frightened about your child's being alone at home. Your child

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probably is sharing your apprehension about this new situation. Discuss your feelings with your child and encourage her to share how he feels about self-care. Children, like adults, are all different. Some are more independent than others; some are more fearful about being left alone, despite the preparation and instructions you provide. If there is fear, try pinpointing the exact source and work from there.

- ❑ Monitor the situation. Do not assume everything is all right because you haven't heard differently. Talk with your child often about what he worries about when home alone. Set aside a scheduled time each evening to talk about what happened during the day. Children who care for themselves are most successful when adults know what's happening.
- ❑ Tell your children that if an adult or an older child does something that makes them feel uncomfortable, they should tell you about it right away – even if they were told to keep it secret.
- ❑ Try introducing “independence training” into your daily pattern. Let your child do tasks that you normally would perform for him. Use the opportunities that arise while you are home or out shopping together to let your child assure himself – and you – of her capabilities.
- ❑ Show your child you have confidence in him and in your decision to let him care for himself. Reassure your child daily of your love.
- ❑ Check in your neighborhood to see if there is a latchkey program available. Many schools, churches, and community groups have started latchkey programs.

Adapted from Iowa Council for Children and Families, Volume 7, No.5, April/May 1983.
(courtesy of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services)