

Parent Coach

When Parents Turn to You for Help

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Home Alone: At What Age Are Children Ready?

A MOTHER ASKS:

I'd like to increase my hours at my job from part-time to full-time when my son starts middle school. He'd be home by himself for an hour and a half between the end of his afterschool program and the time I'd be back from work. Do you think he's old enough to be home alone for that time?

THE PARENT COACH ADVISES:

Whether to leave a child home alone is a decision that millions of parents face every day. An estimated 7 to 15 million children are left home alone on a daily basis in the United States.^{1,3}

There are a number of reasons why children may end up caring for themselves. Very often, the reason is that both parents need to work. The high cost of commercial child care and a lack of adult family members who can babysit are also important factors in parents' decisions to leave their children alone without adult supervision.² Single parents, low-income families, and parents with lower levels of formal education are more likely to leave their children unattended, typically for the reasons given above.²

If the decision to leave a child home alone is made too early, both parents and children may suffer adverse consequences. Parents may face legal consequences,⁴ and children may experience negative health effects.^{2,4,5} Thus, when making the decision to leave a child at home unsupervised, parents need to consider factors in 2 important areas: the law and their child's maturity level.

Legal considerations. Legal troubles may ensue if parents do not comply with existing laws that mandate the age at which children are legally allowed to be left home alone. Statutes governing the practice of leaving children at home unsupervised vary from state to state; the laws in some states are more specific than in others. For example, Illinois law states that any child under the age of 14 years should not be left unsupervised for "an unreasonable period of time"; however, it is legal to leave an 8-year-old unsupervised in Maryland.⁷ Pediatricians should familiarize themselves with all pertinent local, state, and federal statutes so that they can commu-

nicate these clearly to parents when the topic of leaving a child home alone arises.

Understanding and assessing cognitive maturity. Even if a child is old enough to legally be left home alone, parents must also take into consideration their son or daughter's maturity level. Many aspects of brain development are involved in the process of cognitive maturation. As the brain develops, increasing numbers of neural connections are produced; these peak at age 12 years in boys and at age 11 years in girls.^{8,9} Still, this does *not* mean that all 11- to 12-year-olds are mature enough to stay home alone; other factors also play a role. The frontal lobe is the area of the brain responsible for executive functions, such as planning, working memory, and impulse control; it facilitates assessment of problematic situations and determination of the best course of action to take to resolve a problem.^{8,10} The frontal lobe is the last part of the brain to fully develop; development does not begin until late childhood and continues into the mid-20s.^{8,10}

The further along in the process of cognitive maturation a child is, the better his decision-making skills are likely to be.^{8,10} In addition, the more often a child uses this part of the brain during adolescence, the more likely he is to have good executive function skills and to retain these skills as he enters adulthood.^{8,10}

Because so many factors are involved, the rate of development of good decision-making skills varies considerably. Each child must be assessed individually for evidence of maturity in everyday situations.

Possible adverse effects to consider. Parents should also be aware of the possible behavioral and physical side effects their child may experience as a result of being left home alone. These are especially likely to manifest if the child is not really ready for that responsibility. Children left at home unsupervised are more likely to feel alone, scared, or bored.³ The parent-child relationship may suffer as a result of diminished time together.¹ In children aged 14 years or younger, more injuries occur from falls, burns (as a result of house fires), and poisonings in those left home alone than in those who are not left alone.¹¹ A survey of ninth-grade students revealed that children left home alone are more likely to experiment with risky activities, such as smoking cigarettes and using alcohol and drugs.⁵ In addition, children left home alone may perform worse academically; however, there is some support for the notion that children who are

left alone are likely to develop a better sense of responsibility and independence.²

Because there is no clear-cut answer to when a child is able to stay home alone, it may be helpful to provide parents with a list of questions that can help them assess their child's readiness to be left alone (Box).

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Questions to Help Parents Determine Whether Their Child Is Ready to Be Left Home Alone

- What are the local laws concerning unsupervised children? Is it legal to leave my child home alone?
- Does the way in which my child has responded and problem-solved in past stressful or emergency situations show evidence of sufficient maturity to be left alone?
- What activities do I want my child to participate in while left alone? What undesired activities might my child become involved in? (Recall that escalation of risky behavior may occur without adult supervision.^{2,4})
- Is my child comfortable staying home alone? (It is important to listen to any fears he or she might have.)
- Do I feel comfortable leaving my child home alone?¹²
- Have I clearly spelled out the rules of the house and does my child understand them?^{24,13} House rules might address such topics as whether the child is allowed to have friends over (and if so, how many? same-sex only?), under what circumstances (if any) he is allowed to answer the door, which activities are off-limits, and whether he is expected to complete homework and/or chores before you arrive home.¹⁴
- Does the child know how to contact his parents, other responsible adults, and emergency personnel? It is imperative that a child be able to reach a responsible adult if necessary.^{4,3,13}
- Does the child know what to do in case of an accident, fire, or intruder?²¹²
- Has the child successfully completed a "trial run" of being home alone? It's a good idea to conduct a trial run that entails leaving the child home alone for a short time, during which he would be able to experience what being alone feels like—and also have an opportunity to practice self-care measures such as meal preparation and homework completion.^{4,13,15}