

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 46

(Updated November 2004)

HOME ALONE CHILDREN

Every day thousands of children arrive home from school to an empty house. Every week thousands of parents make decisions to leave children home alone while they go to work, run errands, or for social engagements. It is estimated over 40 percent of children are left home at some time, though rarely overnight. In more extreme situations, some children spend so much time without their parent(s) that these children are labeled “latch key children,” referring to the house or apartment key strung visibly around their neck.

The movie “Home Alone,” and its sequel, have portrayed a child’s survival skills in a very humorous, but unrealistic manner. The realities facing children who find themselves home alone are very different. There are many issues and potential risks and dangers that parent(s) should consider before a child is placed in this situation. Parent(s) should consider the following:

- Age readiness
- Definition of parental “rules and expectations”
- How to access parent(s) or other adults (e.g. phone numbers)
- Potentially unsafe situations (e.g., medical emergencies, fire, alcohol, drugs, strangers, guns, etc.)
- When and how to answer the phone or doorbell
- Use of phone, 911 for emergencies
- Use of computer (internet)
- Friends and visitors coming to the house
- Responsibilities for siblings
- Use of unstructured time (e.g., watch TV, videos, etc.);
- Access to “adult” cable TV; internet chat rooms and adult Web sites

Home Alone Children, "Facts for Families," No. 46 (11/04)

It is not possible to make a general statement about when a child can be left home. Many states have laws which hold parents responsible for the supervision of their children. Older adolescents are usually responsible enough to manage alone for limited periods of time. Parent(s) must consider the child's level of maturity and past evidence of responsible behavior and good judgment. When a child is ready to be left alone, a graduated approach should be used starting with a very short period of time (e.g., one hour).

Parent(s) should talk with their youngsters to prepare them for each of the issues or potential problems listed above. In addition, parent(s) should strive to make their home as safe as possible from obvious dangers and hazards and rehearse the developed emergency plan with their children. Parents should also teach their child important safety precautions (i.e., locking the door, dealing with strangers or visitors who come to the house, use of the stove, etc.)

Being home alone can be a frightening and potentially dangerous situation for many children and adolescents. Parents should strive to limit the times when children are home alone. Parents should prepare their children in advance for how to deal with situations that may arise.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

#59 Children Online,

#37 Children and Firearms, and

#54 Children and Watching TV.

See also, *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).

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