

# **HOME ALONE: Is YOUR Child Ready?**

Parenting is such a hard job with lots of hard decisions to make. One of the hard decisions for most parents is knowing if their child is ready to be home alone.

Age is one consideration. Every child matures at a different rate, but local child welfare experts suggest never leaving a child under age 12 home alone. But, age is only part of it.

Every child is different. Some are able to do things on their own. Some are more fearful. Even if your child can be left alone at home for a short time, it may be too much to take care of younger children, too.

We hope this booklet will help you feel more comfortable figuring out if your child is ready – and give you ways to help your child be home alone safely.

**Is your child ready?**

There is no simple way to know if your child can safely be left alone. But, here is a checklist that can help.

Children staying home alone can:



- Get home from school safely
- Use the key to get in the door and lock it when they are inside.
- Say their name, phone number and address in case of an emergency.
- Use the phone.
- Call a neighbor and ask for help if needed.
- Know how and when to call 911.
- *Get* a snack or safely *make* a cold snack.
- Do some homework on their own.
- Follow simple rules.
- Know how to do simple first-aid, like put on a Band-Aid or run cold water on a burn.
- Understand enough about time to know when you will be home. Can your child tell time? Or understand you'll be home when a certain TV program is over?

If you are still not sure if your child is ready, talk with someone who knows your family well, maybe a relative or neighbor, or a professional like your child's teacher, doctor, Scout leader, or clergy.

**How can I prepare my child?**

If you have used the checklist and feel your child can stay home alone for a short time, here are some safety tips:

**Make a few simple rules about what you expect. Say the rules clearly and write them so your child knows what to do. Put the list where your child can see it. Here are rules that other families use:**

- Lock the door after you are inside.
- Call to “check in” as soon as you get home.

**Be very clear about the “DO NOT” RULES FOR SAFETY:**

- Do NOT open the door to anyone.
- Do NOT tell anyone on the phone that you are home alone.
- Do NOT touch matches or a lighter – for any reason.
- Do NOT use the stove or toaster oven.

**You may want to make other rules that fit your child based upon questions like:**

**Home Rules** - Can your child start homework?

**TV Rules** - Are there some TV channels or shows your child cannot watch?

**Cooking Rules** - Can your child use the microwave safely?

**Chore Rules** - Does your child have simple chores to do?

**Other** - Can your child leave the house?

**Write important phone numbers on a list. Put that list where you child can easily see it.**

- Your phone number
- The phone number of a trusted neighbor or others who can help
- 911 – In an emergency, your child might not remember it.

**Talk about emergencies.**

- What to do if you don't answer your phone.
- What is an “emergency?”
- When to call you or 911.
- What to say to 911.
- What to do in case of a fire.

**How you can help your child feel safe when home alone**

Many children have mixed feelings about staying home alone. It makes them feel grownup, but at the same time, they may feel a little afraid. It is normal for parents to have mixed feelings about it, too.

Many children feel more comfortable staying alone if they practice some things. For example:

- Pretend your child can't reach you by phone. What will your child do?
- Pretend there is a knock at the door. What will your child do or say?
- Pretend that the phone rings. What will your child do or say?
- Pretend a friend wants to come over. What will your child do or say?
- Pretend the popcorn in the microwave catches fire. What will your child do?
- Pretend your child loses the key. What will your child do?

Put phone numbers and rules where your child can easily find them.

As a first step, leave for just a short time, like 15 to 30 minutes to let your child get used to being alone.

Always let your child know when you will be home. If you have a change in plans, call your child. Children get worried when things don't happen in the way they expect.

When you come home, spend some time with your child. Be sure to praise your child for following the rules.

Now and then, ask your child to talk about what it feels like being home alone. See if there is anything else you can do to help your child feel comfortable and safe.

Sometimes things don't go well – for lots of reasons. Children do make mistakes. Some mistakes can help your child learn. But, if you feel your child is not ready to be home alone, it's okay to change your mind and look for another safe place until your child is ready.

**If your child is not ready to be home alone, here are places where you can look for help:**



- family, friends or neighbors you can trust
- other parents who also need child care and can take turns with you
- a babysitter you can share with other parents
- after-school care at your child's school
- after-school programs at your place of worship
- YWCA, YMCA or the Boys & Girls Club in your area
- child care centers with after-school programs
- people in your area who care for children after school in their home

If you need help paying for child care:

- Ask if your employer has workplace incentives -- like Family Savings Account programs or inexpensive childcare options.
- See if a local child care center has scholarships or subsidies for after-school care.
- Call *Child Care Partnerships* 412-261-2273 to see if you qualify for subsidized child care.

If you want to talk with someone about your situation, call the Parenting WARMLINE at Family Resources **412-641-4546** or **1-877-WARMLYN** to speak to a trained person who knows what you are going through--another parent or child-care giver--who will listen and help you with simple questions or complex situations.

Produced by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services in cooperation with the CYF Advisory Board



A list of partners who assisted with the preparation of this booklet and resources used can be found at <http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/>