

Home Alone

When can children stay on their own?

Deciding when a child can be left at home alone for a few hours is one of the most important choices any parent can make.

The Child and Family Services Act states that children under 10 should not be left alone. For children under 10 years of age, parents have a legal responsibility to ensure that their children are safe at all times. Young babies and small children must be directly supervised at all times. However, at Peel Children's Aid we know that parents do leave their eight and nine year olds alone from time to time while they go downstairs to get the mail or run across the street to the store. Parents are always expected to prepare their children for emergencies and to think about the maturity and reliability of their child in all situations when children are alone.

Even after the age of 10, parents are legally required to make good arrangements for their children's supervision until they are 16. This expectation is meant to help parents make important decisions about their children's supervision. Parents should remember that a child's age does not always match his or her level of maturity or responsibility. Some 10-year-old children are capable of caring for themselves for a few hours. Others of the same age, or even older, are not. Parents must decide when a child is ready to be left alone and for how long.

Included in this brochure are some things to consider when making the decision to leave a child alone.

Your Child's Abilities

Has the child demonstrated an ability to take care of himself or herself? Can he or she get dressed, find safe activities, remember and follow instructions, and be relied upon to care for property?

Does the child demonstrate good judgment and have experience working out problems independently?

Does the child have special needs that might make it difficult to perform tasks like going to the washroom, calling for help, or getting out of the home in an emergency?

Have any behavioural problems been identified by you, the school, or a doctor, that would pose a risk to the child if left alone? For example, children who have a history of self-harm, aggression, fire setting, wandering from home, destruction of property or an inability to concentrate and follow directions could pose a risk to themselves or others if they were unsupervised.

If the child requires one-to-one help at school from a support worker or teaching assistant, it may not be wise to leave him or her alone at home without direct supervision.

Consideration must be given to the length of time a child is left alone. Longer periods mean the child becomes responsible for more tasks that require an increased level of maturity and ability on the part of the child. Even children 14 to 16 years of age cannot be left for to manage on their own for days at a time without a safety plan in place.

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Your Commitment

You are responsible for your children until they are 16. Because you care for them every day, you are the best person to make decisions about when they can be left alone, and for how long.

When your child is home alone, there must be a clear and reliable way for them to reach you. You must be quickly available or arrange for another responsible adult to be available to help the child in case of emergency. Keep lines of communication open at all times, checking in regularly to ensure your child is safe and comfortable.

You must make sure your child is prepared to handle any emergency that might occur while he or she is alone, like a fire, a flooded appliance, or illness.

Your child needs direction from you about what to do when someone knocks on the door or calls for you on the telephone when you are not home.

You will need to set clear rules about when and if friends can be invited to the home if your child is there without supervision.

Periods of family stress such as separation, moving, or the death of a family member, are not good times to begin leaving your child alone.

Your Child's Environment

Consider your community. Is the neighbourhood safe? Are you and your family a target of violence or harassment? Are there people nearby your child can call if there is a problem? If you have any concerns about the safety of the environment, it may not be a good choice to leave children without direct supervision.

Is your home safe? Before giving your child responsibility for his or her own care, be sure there is a list of emergency numbers including those of adults who can provide help if needed. Your home should have properly working carbon monoxide and smoke detectors and a well-rehearsed fire exit plan.

Keep your home free of hazards such as poisons, unlocked firearms, and exposed wiring.

Establish clear rules about using appliances. Decide at what age your unsupervised children should be allowed to use stoves, irons and other hot appliances. A child responsible enough to be alone for a few hours is not necessarily responsible enough to cook or use a microwave.

Your Child's Reaction

Before leaving a child alone, find out how your child feels about it. Ask if there are things that may be frightening or if he or she feels confident to handle situations.

Think about how your child has reacted to stressful situations. How has the child dealt with difficult or frightening situations in the past? Would the reaction be different if the same situation occurred while the child is alone?

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