

Help children develop skills for staying home alone

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Summer is here, and if you're the parent of a child ages nine to 12, you can bet this question is also coming from your child: "Why can't I stay home by myself this summer?" How do you know when your child is ready for this big responsibility?

Transitioning a child to stay home alone is a big step for every family. U.S. Census reports indicate that seven million of the nation's 38 million children ages five to 14 are left home alone regularly. Almost 600,000 five- to eight-year-olds fend for themselves and 3.4 million children are under the care of siblings. The national average for "home alone" time is six hours per week, and higher-income parents are more likely to leave kids unsupervised. Statistics also indicate that unsupervised kids are at greater risk of accident, harm by strangers, siblings, or friends and are more apt to commit crimes than those under the care of an adult.

It is strongly recommend that you not leave children under 10 at home alone for any extended period of time. You can check with your local Child Protection Agency to find out age guidelines for children being left alone.

Once parents have decided that it's safe to leave their children home alone, they should talk about safety issues. Parents should tell children they should never open the door for anyone. A discussion about the child's boundaries such as: Can she play outside or visit the neighbors? Can he ride his bike, go to the playground or visit friends?

It is also essential to teach children how to answer the phone and take messages without indicating they are alone. Or, they should learn how to use caller ID or an answering machine to screen calls. A plan of action is important, so parents should post emergency telephone numbers, their work and/or cell phone numbers and numbers of neighbors or relatives who could help if needed. Have a back-up plan if you can't be reached.

Work with your children to set rules to follow if they are staying home alone. Children are less likely to break rules if they are involved in setting them up. Go over rules periodically and post them in a prominent place. When parents are away, they should call home at unpredictable times to see how the children are doing and let them know they will be checking up again.

It is not a good idea to start having children stay home alone all day, every day without a couple trial runs first. Staying home alone should start with a few hours and gradually work up to more time left alone. Then, if the plan is not working, start to look for alternatives.

Hiring a reliable teen to watch your children, swapping time with a relative or neighbor and part time childcare are all manageable options. A combination of these may be an option, along with taking advantage of organized activities and camps available during the summer months. Talk to your child about what he can do to occupy the time alone and help him come up with a list of ideas to provide some structure with a mixture of chores and fun activities.

Staying home alone is a big responsibility for children. It's important for parents to give them the skills they need to be safe and to feel comfortable. Follow up is key. Parents should touch base with their child about how they are feeling when home alone, what worked and what didn't and ask any concerns they need to talk about.

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