

March/April 2014

SAFETY TIP OF THE MONTH

When is it okay for your child to be home alone?

The decision to leave a child home alone is often the cause of anxiety for parents. Many have to leave their children home alone for periods of time, often during after school hours while the parent is at work or social engagements. Many families have few choices due to the limited availability and cost associated with child care and after school programs.

Failure to provide adequate supervision is considered neglect in most states. However few states provide details on what is "adequate" supervision, or the appropriate age that a child can be left alone. Only four states have legislation that provide legal age restrictions for children left alone: Illinois age 14, Oregon age 10, and Maryland and North Carolina at age 8. There are 11 additional states that provide recommendations ranging from ages 8 to 12 years. Missouri statutes do not provide a legal age restriction. The Children's Division Abuse/Neglect Hotline takes reports of a child under age 8 left alone, with a face to face safety check held within 3 hours.



When making the decision of whether your child is responsible enough to be left home alone, there are several factors that need to be considered including an assessment of their confidence and maturity, as well as their skills at meeting their basic needs and keeping themselves safe. Questions to ask while making this decision include: Can the child handle boredom and loneliness? Are they uncomfortable or afraid to be alone? Do they know how to safely fix themselves a snack or meal? Do they know how to respond if someone calls or knocks on the door? Do they follow your rules regularly? How do they respond to stress? Even if they are ready to stay home alone, are they ready and capable of caring for siblings?

Rules and boundaries should be discussed that address topics such as who can come over when the parent is not home, online safety, and access to adult cable. Safety precautions should also be taken by locking up guns, alcohol, potential poisons, and medications. Your child should know basic first aid and have access to emergency contacts in case you can not be reached. Does your child know what to do if the lights go out or if the doors or windows are open or broken when they come home?

Being trusted to stay home alone can be a positive experience for a child who is mature and well prepared. It can boost their confidence and promote independence. It can also cause anxiety and stress for some children, especially if it occurs frequently or for long periods of time. Even the most responsible child should not be left alone too often.

Helpful Child Safety Resources:

[Red Cross Babysitter Safety Classes](#)

[Family Decision Making Tools](#)

[Factsheet and Tips for Families](#)

[Latchkey Kids Calling Program](#)

Tips for Parents:

-  Have a Trial Period
-  Start with Short Time frames
-  Role Play
-  Establish Rules
-  Discuss Emergencies
-  Create an Emergency Contact List and Escape Plans
-  Check In
-  Talk About it
-  Don't Overdo it