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# KNOW THE RULES...

## For Children Who Are Home Alone

In today's busy society many children are caring for themselves before or after school and at other times of the year. Although the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends adult supervision for children until about the age of 11 or 12, for many families this isn't possible. When faced with this situation, maturity should be the determining factor in whether a child should be left alone. There are a number of important points families should consider prior to allowing their children to be self-supervised. Parents and guardians need to assess their children. Does he or she have the personality self-confidence, and judgment skills to accept this responsibility? Will the experience be positive and help build and enhance the child's self-image, or will the experience promote additional anxiety in the child who may be afraid to stay alone? Having a family conference to discuss the arrangement is a good place to start. House rules, expectations of each family member, and a daily routine should be defined. At the end of the day, parents and guardians may also use the experience to have regular family meetings to help ensure the arrangement is still working and identify any alterations needing to be made. Here are some steps your family may take to help ensure a positive after-school experience. Before allowing your child to go home alone, you should...

- Determine if there are other community resources or organizations providing care or support for children who are home alone.
- Ask your child how he or she feels about being alone. Is your child afraid to be left alone, or does he or she have the maturity and initiative to want to assume that responsibility?
- Decide if you feel your child is able to follow directions and solve problems on his or her own.
- Determine how long your child will be alone, accessible you or another trusted adult will be in case of an emergency, and safe the neighborhood is by contacting your local law-enforcement agency and checking the incidence and types of crime in your neighborhood.
- Make sure you've set specific rules to be followed by your child while he or she is alone, and give your child specific instructions about how to reach you at all times. This should also include information about what to do if your child needs assistance and can't reach you right away.
- Remember you're in charge, even if it is from a distance.
- Once you've decided to proceed, you should check to make sure your child knows...
  - His or her full name, address, and telephone number.
  - Your full name, the exact name of the place where you work, your work telephone number, and any pager or cellular telephone numbers you may have.
  - How to make a telephone call to request help in an emergency using 911 or the appropriate number(s) in your area.
  - How to carry his or her key so it is hidden and secure. Your name and address should **not** be on the key, and it may be wise to leave an extra key with a trusted friend or neighbor.
  - Not to walk or play alone on the way home, and never take shortcuts home.

- What to do if he or she is being followed. If that happens your child should turn around, run in the opposite direction, and go to a designated place to get help and tell a trusted adult what happened.
  - To always check out the home before entering looking for such things as open, ajar, or broken doors and windows or anything that doesn't look right. Go to a designated safe place to call for help if something doesn't seem right.
  - To always lock the door after entering and make sure the house is secure.
  - To immediately check in with you upon returning home to let you know he or she has arrived safely.
  - To tell callers you can't go to the telephone and offer to take a message instead of letting people know he or she is home alone.
  - Not to open the door for or talk to anyone who comes to the home unless the person is a trusted family friend or relative, he or she feels comfortable being alone with that person, **and** the visit has been pre-approved by you.
  - To stay alert for true emergencies such as a fire or gas-main leak that would require the need to leave the home.
  - To check with you or another trusted adult if he or she is in doubt about anything.
- As a parent or guardian, you should make sure you have...
    - A daily schedule of homework, chores, and activities for your child to follow.
    - A list kept close to the telephone including numbers for you, law enforcement, the fire department, an ambulance service, your doctor, a poison-control center, and a trusted adult who's available in case of an emergency.
    - Written instructions about which, if any, appliances may be used; what to do in case of fire; and how to get out of the house if there is a fire. A plan if you are detained and what to do if your child's plans change.
    - Instructions about watching television, using a computer, talking on the telephone, and inviting friends over when you aren't home.
    - Time to discuss the day's events with your child. Make sure he or she knows it is okay to discuss anything with you, especially something that may have made him or her feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused in any way.

Source: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children