

Preparing Children to Stay Alone



At some point during the school years, parents begin to consider the possibility of having children care for themselves before or after school rather than being cared for by others. Self-care can be a rewarding experience for children who are ready for it. It can help them develop independence and responsibility and can give them confidence in their own abilities. However, if the child is not ready, self-care can be a frightening and potentially dangerous situation.

How can you tell if your child is ready?

Unfortunately, there is no magic age at which children develop the maturity and good sense needed to stay alone. However, there are some signs that show your child may be ready. First, your child should indicate a desire and willingness to stay alone. Children who are easily frightened or express an unwillingness to stay alone are probably not ready for this responsibility. In addition, your child should be showing signs of accepting the responsibility and being aware of the needs of others and should be able to consider

alternatives and make decisions independently. Children who are able to get ready for school on time, solve problems on their own, complete homework and household chores with a minimum of supervision, remember to tell you where they are going and when they will be back are demonstrating some of the skills they need to care for themselves. For many children these abilities begin to appear between the ages of 10-12. Finally, your child should be able to talk easily with you about interests and concerns. Good parent-child communication is needed to ensure that any fears or problems that arise because of staying alone can be quickly discussed and dealt with.

If your child is showing such signs, you may want to consider self-care. However, several other factors must also enter into your decision. These are: the neighborhood in which you live, the availability of adults nearby and how long your child will be alone. If your neighborhood is unsafe, if there are no adults nearby to call in case of emergency or if your child must remain alone for a very long time, it is best to continue to use some form of child care even if your child seems ready to stay alone.

Preparing Your Child to Stay Alone

If you and your child agree that self-care is appropriate, the next step is providing your child with the knowledge and training needed for this new responsibility.

Children who stay alone need to know how to react in situations such as:

- being locked out
- being afraid
- being bored
- being lonely
- arguments with brothers and sisters

and house rules about:

- leaving the house
- having friends in
- cooking and use of kitchen equipment
- appropriate snacks and meals
- talking with friends on the phone
- duties to be completed while home alone

Children who stay alone need to have:

Good telephone skills:

- a list of emergency numbers
- knowledge of what to say in an emergency situation
- how to respond if someone calls
- understanding of appropriate and inappropriate reasons for calling parents or other adults for help

Good personal safety skills:

- how to answer the door when alone
- how to lock and unlock windows
- what to do if approached by a stranger on the way home
- what to do if they think someone is in the house when they get home
- what to do if someone touches them inappropriately

Good home safety skills:

- kitchen safety (use of appliances, knives and tools)
- what to do if they smell smoke or gas, or in the event of a fire
- what to do during severe storms
- basic first aid techniques and how to know when to get help

Providing your children with this knowledge gives them confidence in their abilities and will help them deal with any emergencies that may arise. When teaching your children, give information gradually rather than all at once. Too much information at one time is difficult to remember. Present your children with a number of situations and have them act out their responses. For example, pretend you are a stranger at the door asking to use the phone to call a tow truck, and then pretend you are a salesman wanting to leave some free samples. Giving many examples and having your children actually respond to the situation will help them respond quickly and flexibly if the situation actually occurs when they are alone.

Establishing A Trial Period

After you have helped your child acquire the skills and knowledge needed to stay alone, set up a trial period of self-care in order to see how your child adjusts to the situation. Initially presenting it as a temporary arrangement lets children know they can choose not to continue if they are uncomfortable staying alone and also allows parents to more easily end the arrangement if they feel the child is unable to handle the situation.

Throughout the trial period, and afterwards if you continue the arrangement, talk frequently with your child about his or her feelings. This will allow you to deal with problems quickly and will help you remain close to your child. Also, periodically review house rules and safety information with your child. Children forget easily – especially if the information is seldom used. However, this infrequently-used knowledge – such as what to do in case of a fire or other emergency – may one day be critical to your child's safety.

Children who are mentally and emotionally ready to stay alone, who have been taught the skills and knowledge needed to deal with this new responsibility and who are able to talk easily with their parents about fears or concerns that may arise, can gain much from the opportunity to care for themselves.

When is it legal to leave children alone?

When thinking about leaving children alone, whether for a short or long time, it is important for parents to consider all the risks involved. There are many potential risks to children that need to be considered. It is also important to understand that parents and other persons responsible for a minor's welfare also face risks.

Parents are legally responsible for their children's welfare until they reach adulthood. Part of caring for children is providing adequate supervision. Under some circumstances a parent can be charged with neglect for leaving children unattended.

The children may also be removed from their home and placed into the state's care for their protection, until a judge decides that the home is safe for the children to return to.

What is lack of supervision?

Illinois law defines a neglected minor, in part, as *“any minor under the age of 14 years whose parent or other person responsible for the minor's welfare leaves the minor without supervision for an unreasonable period of time without regard for the mental or physical health, safety or welfare of that minor.”*

Juvenile Court Act, 705 ILCS 405/2-3(1)(d)

How long may a child be left alone?

What is appropriate under certain circumstances may be considered child neglect in other circumstances.

While recognizing that many factors may apply, Illinois law lists 15 specific factors to be considered when deciding whether a child has been left alone for an unreasonable period of time. They include:

1. the age of the minor
2. the number of minors left at the location
3. special needs of the minor, including whether the minor is physically or mentally handicapped, or otherwise in need of ongoing prescribed medical treatment such as periodic dosages of insulin or other medications
4. the duration of time in which the minor was left without supervision
5. the condition and location of the place where the child was left without supervision
6. the time of day or night when the minor was left without supervision
7. the weather conditions, including whether the minor was left in a location with adequate protection from the natural elements such as adequate heat or light

8. the location of the parent or guardian at the time the minor was left without supervision, the physical distance the minor was from the parent or guardian at the time the minor was without supervision
9. whether the minor's movement was restricted, or the minor was otherwise locked within a room or other structure
10. whether the minor was given a phone number of a person or location to call in the event of an emergency and whether the minor was capable of making an emergency call
11. whether there was food and other provision left for the minor
12. whether any of the conduct is attributable to economic hardship or illness and the parent, guardian or other person having physical custody or control of the child made a good faith effort to provide for the health and safety of the minor
13. the age and physical and mental capabilities of the person(s) who provided supervision for the minor
14. whether the minor was left under the supervision of another person
15. any other factor that would endanger the health and safety of that particular minor

Putting The Child's Best Interest First

The welfare of the child is the primary concern of child protection investigators. If they determine that child neglect has occurred, the Department of Children and Family Services will talk with the family about what is considered acceptable and unacceptable.

The solution may involve a promise on the part of parents not to leave the children alone, or the Department may help the family locate child care services for some or all of the children currently left alone. In more serious cases, a child may be removed from the home for their safety.

DCFS is not trying to punish the parents or the family, but wants to make sure the children are safe and cared for properly. As you can see, parents and other persons responsible for a minor's welfare must think carefully about many things before leaving their children alone. This is important, even if a child is left alone only occasionally or for short periods of time.

When children are placed in situations of independence that they can handle, it can help them learn responsibility. However, asking too much too soon can produce frightening and potentially dangerous consequences for both the child and the parent.