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### When Can You Leave a Child Home Alone?

The 1990 movie *Home Alone* may have poked fun at what could happen when an eight-year old boy is accidentally left home alone, yet in reality it is not uncommon for thousands of American children to be left home alone on any given day. Children who are left home alone - sometimes known as "latchkey kids" -- are often left without adult supervision for reasons beyond a parent's control and, in some unfortunate situations, out of neglect or [child abuse](#).

For anyone considering whether it is alright to leave a child at home alone, there are important safety and legal guidelines to consider before leaving any child unsupervised for any extended period of time.

#### **Laws for Leaving a Child Home Alone**

Only a couple of states have laws that specify the age when a child can be left home alone, including Maryland (age 8) and Illinois (age 14). However, most states have guidelines with the Department of Health and Human Services or other child protective agencies that test a child's ability to be left home alone. Factors may include the child's age and maturity, the overall safety of the surrounding area/circumstances, and arrangements made to secure the child's safety.

Below are general guidelines to follow when considering the age range for leaving a child home alone.

**7 & under** - Should not be left alone for any period of time. This may include leaving children unattended in cars, playgrounds, and backyards. The determining consideration would be the dangers in the environment and the ability of the caretaker to intervene.

**8 to 10 years** - Should not be left alone for more than 1½ hours and only during daylight and early evening hours.

**11 to 12 years** - May be left alone for up to 3 hours but not late at night or in circumstances requiring inappropriate responsibility.

**13 to 15 years** - May be left unsupervised, but not overnight.

**16 to 17 years** - May be left unsupervised (in some cases, for up to two consecutive overnight periods).

#### **How to Know If a Child Is Ready to Stay at Home Alone**

It is important to note that no two children are alike, and parents must decide on a case-by-case basis what is best for their child. Therefore, in addition to the general guidelines listed above, a parent or caretaker should consider the following before leaving a child at home alone:

- The age and maturity level of the child
- The length of time the child will need to stay home alone
- Whether the child works well independently and follows directions
- The age and number of *other* children being left at home
- The safety of the surrounding neighborhood
- Willingness of neighbors to check in with the child during the day
- Whether the child would feel "safe" staying home alone

#### **Safety Tips for Leaving a Child Home Alone**

Finally, if leaving your child at home alone is a necessity - at least where older children are involved - you can follow the following guidelines:

- Have the child memorize his or her full name, address, and telephone number

- Post a list of emergency, local, and long distance numbers to call in the event of an emergency
- Inform immediate neighbors that your child may be home alone on some days. Not only can a neighbor be a good resource in the event of an emergency, it can help alleviate potential calls to child protective services by unaware neighbors
- Call the child at several times during the day while you are away.
- Teach the child how to work the locks on windows and doors and to lock them when at home
- Tell the child not to go into other people's home (even neighbors) without your permission
- Designate a "safe house" to run to if the child ever feels that he or she is in danger
- Never allow a child to work the oven or stove without a parent or adult caretaker
- Consider programs offered by schools, organizations, and churches for extended periods of home alone time

For more information on keeping your child safe, browse a collection of [parenting tips and articles](#) .

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