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Home Alone: Is My Child Old Enough?

Kirk Blair, M.S., Extension Associate, Human Development & Family Science,
Ohio State University Extension, The Ohio State University

Whether for a few minutes or a few hours, all parents will face this dilemma—*is my child old enough to stay home alone?*

If you look to Ohio's state or local laws, you won't find a minimum age specified. Instead, the Ohio Revised Code says that parents are responsible for providing "proper care and supervision" for their children. So, the real question isn't so much one of age, but one of your child's maturity and readiness and your ability to plan for safety, emergencies and activities.

Parents need to look at their child's maturity and readiness in three broad areas: Physical; Intellectual; and Social/Emotional.

Physical

Can your child:

- ❖ *Lock and unlock the doors and windows?*
- ❖ *Use the telephone?*
- ❖ *Operate appliances (such as a can opener, microwave, toaster oven, stove)?*

If your child is not able to be reasonably self-sufficient in your absence, they are not ready to stay home alone.

Intellectual

Your child must be able to:

- ❖ *Read and take a written message.*
- ❖ *Follow and give directions.*
- ❖ *Understand and describe house rules and safety/ emergency procedures.*

You must be confident that your child can do basic problem solving and make good decisions in your absence. Be sure your child has at least three alternate contacts and another "safe place" in the neighborhood where they can go for help. Post contact and emergency numbers next to the phone. Take time to rehearse possible safety/ emergency situations and how to respond. Here are a few to discuss:

- *What to do in case of a power-outage, tornado or other emergency.*

- *Who should be let in the house—(uniformed persons are strangers too).*
- *How the telephone should be answered and what information is OK to give out—(never let a stranger know they are home alone).*
- *What to do for basic first aid and other injuries.*
- *Establish a “code-word” you can use if you need to communicate to your child through another person.*

Social/ Emotional

Your child needs to:

- ❖ *Feel good about being left home alone.*
- ❖ *Feel confident in their ability to take care of themselves.*
- ❖ *Be comfortable with limited social interaction.*

Take your cues from your child—if they say they are afraid, lonely, or unsure of their ability to stay home alone, they are not ready.

Make a Plan

Once you are satisfied your child is ready, create a plan. Begin by talking with your child about the possibility. Ask if they would like to stay home alone. If not, don't force the issue. If yes, then:

- Talk about house rules, expectations and write down safety

and emergency procedures—ensure your child understands what to do and who to contact.

- Make a list of play rules—is it OK to play outside? When? With other neighborhood kids? What activities are “off limits?”
- Develop a list of activities, besides TV and video games, and stock a “crafts center.”
- Discuss food and snacks and their preparation.
- Decide if any household chores are to be done and standards for their completion.

There is no magic age at which children can stay home alone. Instead they need to have maturity, good problem solving abilities, and good sense. If both parents and their children agree that staying home alone is a workable solution, they must take the time to discuss, plan and prepare together.

References

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