

Home Alone Handbook

Is your child ready?



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Introduction

One of the hallmarks of growing up is becoming more independent. Parents may find it difficult to let go, but it is very important to allow children to gain skills that will help them be successful adults. One of the ways children can show their independence is by staying home alone. During the summer or other times kids are out of school, childcare may be an issue. You may have plans for camps or for grandparents to watch your child; however, sometimes other arrangements may be needed. If you have an older child, you may be wondering if they are ready to stay home alone. Because every child is different, there are no hard and fast rules regarding what age is appropriate to leave a child home alone (though some states have laws regarding this issue); however, there are several things to consider when making the decision to trust your child with this responsibility.



About the Author

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Home Alone

Are They Ready?

Legal Status

Arkansas does not have a legal limit on what age a child may be left home alone. Some school districts have rules about what age they will allow a child to get off the bus at home without an adult present (for many, that age is 9 years old or older), and that may be a good guideline for your family. Although there is no state regulation on a safe age to leave a child alone, an infant or toddler should never be left at home alone, even for a brief time. Many child welfare experts suggest age 12 as a minimum, safe age for being left for more than an hour or so, while children 9 - 12 may be alone for an hour or less. It is up to the local police whether or not to file charges should a call be made while a child is home alone. Additionally, there are no regulations about leaving children in charge of siblings or others; however, it is not advised that an infant or toddler be left in the care of a sibling under the age of 13.

Age and Maturity

When assessing whether your child is ready to stay home alone, their age is certainly a consideration; however, every child is different. Some 8-year-olds are far more mature and capable than some 15-year-olds.

Several things to ask yourself when making this important decision are:

- How long do you plan to leave your child alone? And at what time of day?
- Are there neighbors nearby who could be called on in an emergency?
- Is your child comfortable with staying home alone?
- Can your child read well enough to follow instructions?
- Can your child open and close windows, lock and unlock doors, and operate small appliances (toaster, microwave)?
- Can your child reliably use the telephone, and do you have one available for them to use (either landline, cell, or tablet)?

- Does your child have the maturity to behave calmly in a crisis?
- Does your child understand plans for emergencies such as fire or storms?
- Would your child reliably follow house rules such as staying inside or in the yard, not answering the door or divulging to a stranger that they are home alone, staying away from dangerous things in the house such as chemicals and firearms, and responsibly using the internet?

If you or your child are not comfortable with these issues, they are probably not ready to stay home alone. If you want to begin preparing them to stay home alone in the future, these are good guidelines to keep in mind.

Talk to Your Child

Is your child excited about or even ok with staying home alone? If they are afraid, it may have an impact on decision-making now or comfort with being home alone in the future. Be sure to discuss the idea with your child and be open to their concerns and ideas. Having a trial run where you leave the child for a very brief time is a good idea. Maybe leave and walk around the block or go to the corner store. If they are calm and collected, they will likely be fine for a longer period. Keep in mind, “a longer period” may be 30 minutes to an hour, or it may be several hours depending on your child’s maturity, age, and comfort level. In general, children under age 12 will find staying home all day very difficult to manage, and it is not suggested that younger children be left alone for longer than an hour or so. Children are far more likely to get into trouble the longer they are alone due to boredom or curiosity. It is very important to set boundaries and expectations with your child regardless of age.

Ask your child what they would do in emergencies. Fire? Knock on the door? Storm? Injury? How would they handle these situations? Be willing to role play different scenarios with your child to give them practice and confidence. This will be helpful beyond staying home alone.

If you decide that your child is ready to stay home alone, don’t overdo it. Be sure to limit the time they are on their own, especially if they are young. Teens can typically do just fine even if left home all day; however, children under 12 or 13 will need balance with other activities and other kids.

Home Alone

Preparing for Emergencies

Is your child ready to stay home alone? One way to decide and to prepare them is to discuss emergencies and “what if” scenarios. Does your child know what to do if someone rings the doorbell? If there is a fire? If the power goes out? If they injure themselves? While you can’t discuss or cover every possible thing that could ever go wrong, you should cover likely (and unlikely but dangerous) emergency situations with your child before they are allowed to stay home alone. Even if none of these things ever happen, it is always better to be prepared.

Telephone Usage and Availability:

One of the major differences between leaving a child home alone today and leaving a child home alone even as recently as 5 years ago is the increase in “cellphone only homes.” Over 73% of children live in homes that do not have a landline telephone. In general, this change is minor when we think about the day-to-day workings of a family, but when leaving a child home alone, their access to a working telephone is of crucial importance to their safety. Older children may have their own cellphone, but younger children often do not. So, if your child is one who does not have their own phone, what can you do to allow them to stay home when you have no landline?

If you have reliable internet access, an iPod, iPad, other tablet, or home computer will often have options such as FaceTime, Skype, or similar apps or options, so these might be a possibility for short periods. Home alarms generally have a way of contacting police or fire in emergencies; however, many families do not have these services available. If your child does not have access to a reliable form of communication, it is not advisable to leave them at home alone. If you think you will leave your child home

alone regularly and you do not currently have a landline telephone it may be worthwhile to install one. Typically, a simple landline that isn't used for long distance can cost as little as \$5 per month, and many communities have programs to help low-income families with utilities such as phone service. Another option is to get your child a mobile phone to use to stay in touch with you while they are alone. Your choice will differ depending on your circumstances, but the importance of having reliable communication cannot be overstated.

Telephone Safety: Whether you have a landline, a cell phone, or an internet-based phone, it is important to teach your child how to interact with people on the phone, how to make outgoing calls, and how to responsibly answer the phone. Because our society currently relies so heavily on text-based communication, many children do not know how to respectfully answer a phone call, dial a telephone, call 911, or look for a phone number.

- Teach your child your phone number at an early age. They should learn all 10 digits including the area code to insure that they can call you or give your number to someone in an emergency.
- Teach your child how to answer the phone using practice calls or having a friend or relative call. Because of limited experience on the phone, many children will feel hesitant to answer or talk on the phone, so these practice calls will increase their confidence and help them build an important skill. You may want to teach your child to avoid answering the phone unless they recognize your number or the number of another relative; however, if you need to call from another location such as an office or a friend's cell phone, this can be problematic. Older children should learn to answer the phone safely, and you should discuss specific rules and preferences for this with your child.
- Teach your child:
 - to make an emergency call on a landline and on a cellphone and WHEN it is appropriate to make those calls.
 - to answer the phone (when appropriate) politely without giving their name to the caller.
 - to NEVER tell a caller that they are home alone, but rather to say their parent "can't come to the phone right now."
 - to take a message from a caller, and to call you with the message if it cannot wait.
 - to not give out parents' cell or work numbers over the phone to an unknown caller.
 - to call you if they are repeatedly called by an unknown caller.



Emergency Preparedness:

Emergency preparedness is important for all children and families, regardless of whether or not a child stays home alone. Understanding basic safety rules, emergency responses, and first aid are helpful throughout life, and they give children a sense of self-confidence that is invaluable.

Visitor Safety: Many families instruct children to avoid answering the door when home alone. You will need to decide what rules to place on your child depending on your housing situation, your child's maturity and age, and your comfort with your child answering the door in your absence. For example, if you have a buzzer and intercom system you may need to treat that differently than a home that has a peephole or window.

■ Be sure your child knows:

- to keep the doors locked at all times when they are alone.
- to check the peephole or look through a window if someone knocks, or to simply ignore the knocking.
- that they should NEVER let anyone in or go out to someone even if they ask to use the restroom or phone, say they know you, or that they have a delivery. If you are expecting a delivery, let the child know how you want them to handle it.
- if someone will be coming by to check on them. Be sure tell them in advance whom to expect and approximately when they will come by.
- who they need to call if someone keeps knocking or calling through the door or if they feel they are in danger.

Crisis or Emergency Situations: It is important to prepare children to respond effectively in a crisis or emergency situation. Practicing drills or giving written instructions may help a child remain calm if something unexpected should happen. Some examples your child should be prepared for include:

- **Power Outage:** Depending on the time of day, the season, whether the child is relying on the internet or electricity for their communication, and their proximity to neighbors will all influence how big a problem a blackout can be. Make sure your child has access to a flashlight and knows to call you if a power outage occurs. Offering options of activities to do while waiting for the power to come back on may also help keep them calm.

- **Being Locked Out:** Locking keys in the house or forgetting a key can happen to anyone, so it is best to help your child plan what to do if they are locked out of the house. Leave a key with a neighbor or in a safe location that is out of sight but accessible to the child. Another option may be to install a lock on your door that has a coded keypad and does not require a key.
- **Severe Weather:** Even if your child is not home alone frequently, it is always a good idea to have a severe weather plan for the whole family that includes an accessible emergency kit that includes (at the very least) water, snacks/food, a small first aid kit, and a flashlight. Be sure your child knows where to go in case of tornado warning or sighting.
- **Fire:** Be sure your child knows where to go in case of a house fire. Having a fire extinguisher in the home and accessible to the child is a good idea. Check to insure that all smoke detectors are in working order. Teach your child how to stay low, check doors for heat, open windows in case they need to evacuate, and what to do if their clothes catch fire (Stop, Drop, & Roll!). They should understand that their first priority is to get out of the house, and they should not return to the house for anything.
- **Appliance/Plumbing:** Teaching your child where shut-off valves for sinks and toilets are located and how to turn them may help avoid larger problems should a leak or overflow occur. If you have natural gas appliances, make sure your child knows to avoid pilot lights and that they know what a leak smells like and how to respond if one should occur.
- **Minor Injury:** Make sure there is a first aid kit available to your child that would allow them to address a minor injury such as a cut or scrape. If you expect your child to stay home alone frequently or to be in charge of younger siblings at any time, it would be a good idea to find a first aid class for them to take. Contact your county extension agent to find resources in your area.
- **Major Injury:** If they sustain a major injury, they should learn to call for emergency help using 911 or to contact you or a neighbor.

There is a lot to think about when preparing a child to stay alone. Even if they will only be alone for 30 minutes, understanding what to do in an emergency builds confidence and skill that lasts a lifetime.



Home Alone

Structure and Fun

One worry you may have about leaving your child home alone is wondering what they will do while you're gone! It's natural to wonder, and it is a good idea to have structure in place for your child and to give them ideas of what to do to keep themselves busy. Most children will find plenty to keep them occupied, but communicating clear expectations will help you both get the most out of their newfound freedom. Here are some tips to help you find a good balance between structure and fun.

Structure:

Giving your child clear expectations for what they should and should not do while they are alone is key for their safety, security, and confidence as well as yours. If they are unsure what they can and cannot do, they may do things you do not want them to do or may not complete tasks you expect them to complete which will cause conflict and disappointment. It is important to take your child's maturity level, age, comfort, and experience into account when assigning tasks and setting limits.

If you or your child are not comfortable with these issues, they are probably not ready to stay home alone. If you want to begin preparing them to stay home alone in the future, these are good guidelines to keep in mind.

Chores: Giving your child specific tasks to complete while you are away helps teach them responsibility and helps them gain confidence in their ability to complete things on their own. A child who is old enough to stay alone for longer than an hour or so should be old enough to do most

household tasks including laundry, cleaning with household cleaning products, and even some minor repairs like painting. Give them enough tasks to fill some time, but not so many that they will have no down time. It is also important that you attach consequences for not completing assigned tasks such as removal of privileges. Many kids will wait until the last minute before you arrive to frantically finish all their tasks, but they are learning time management!

Homework: If your child will be coming home alone after school, a reasonable expectation for them will be to do their homework before they do anything else. Some days, this may mean that they are still working on it when you get home. Again, depending on the child, they may wait until closer to your arrival and bend the rules a bit. How you deal with those issues will vary based on your style of discipline.

Practice: Does your child have a hobby or skill they are learning? Practicing while no one else is around is a great way to spend their time. Practice piano or taekwondo. Work on a knitting or art project. Learn a new song on the guitar. Sing your heart out with a favorite band. If your child is taking lessons, expecting them to practice for at least a specified amount of time each day can offer some structure.

Parental Controls and Screen Expectations: Be sure to enable parental controls on any computers or tablets that you have in the house. In general, your child will likely know what they can and cannot view on television or the internet, and many kids will govern themselves; however, when they are home alone, they may be less likely to adhere to those rules.

Set Reasonable Limits on Screen Time: It is difficult to monitor and control screen time while you are not there, but giving kids clear expectations will help them learn to gauge and govern their own behavior. Offering some leeway on how much TV, gaming, or internet they can access while alone is a good idea. Although you do not want them sitting in front of a screen

all day, they may have a limited amount of other things available to do, so limiting them to an hour or two throughout the course of an entire day or evening may be unreasonable depending on their access to other sources of entertainment such as friends or outdoor activity.

Food: It is important that your child have safe, healthy choices for meals and snacks that require little to no preparation. Unless they are trained and comfortable cooking on the stove or using the oven, it is best to stick with the toaster or microwave for heating items like toast or leftovers. Communicate clear instructions on what they should and should not eat, but understand that growing kids who are feeling more confident will likely test boundaries. Offering healthy options rather than dictating what they eat is a way to give them a sense of ownership over their choices.

Fun!

And now for the fun part! What will your child do all day? There are lots of resources online that offer ideas about charts or other tools that may help keep your child on track. Remember that part of the fun of staying home alone is that there is not an adult there to program every moment of their time. Most kids will not have difficulty finding fun things to do while they are alone, but some may need a little guidance or some ideas. Especially if you do not allow your child to go outside, make sure they have plenty of things to occupy their time in the house. Between completing their chores/homework, reading, watching TV, FaceTiming a friend, dancing or singing to their favorite songs, and preparing and eating a meal or snack, they will stay pretty busy.

As your child gains confidence in staying home alone, you will gain confidence in their ability to do so responsibly. Enjoy this new milestone and help your child grow into a responsible adult!

Resources

US Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau (2018).
"Leaving your child home alone."

Grow by WebMD (2020). "Is your preteen ready to stay home alone or to watch younger siblings?"

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021). "Home alone: Prepare kids for emergencies."

Babysitting Basics Courses available statewide. Contact your County Extension Agent for more information.





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