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Home Alone After School: Is Your Child Ready?

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Sooner or later, your child will be home alone after school. Now, it could be due to a glitch in childcare arrangements, your unexpected work delay getting home or a weather-related school cancellation. Hopefully though, it will be carefully planned in advance with plenty of time to prepare and rehearse different safety scenarios with your child.

Parents need to be sure their children have the skills and maturity to handle being alone safely, as well as be aware of the laws in their state regarding this issue. Being trusted to stay home alone can be a positive experience for a child who is mature and well-prepared. However, children, especially those under 12-years-old, face real risks when left unsupervised, including accidents, fires, leaving the home unsupervised, and the inability to deal with strangers. **The NYSPPCC recommends that children under the age of 12 should never be left home alone.**

To increase the safety of your child and ease your stress level, here are a few suggestions:

- **Make sure they are comfortable entering the home alone.** They should have no trouble opening the locks and turning off any alarms if they are installed and then locking the doors and turning the alarm back on when they are safely inside.
- **Rehearse different scenarios with your children.** What do they do when the doorbell rings; how do they respond to strangers on the phone; what should they do if they have a question and can't reach you? What would they do if they got hurt while home alone?

- **Set clear rules for what they can and cannot do when you are not home**, for example, rules for cooking, using the microwave, completing their homework, leaving the house, or having friends over, and for TV time or Internet time. It might be helpful to set up a schedule for them to follow, include the time that you'll arrive home.
- **Try a "test run" leaving your child alone for just one hour and then explore how they felt.** If they were scared or anxious, they may not be ready. Talk to them about their concerns.
- **Be sure to have phone numbers posted where you can be reached.** List numbers for fire and police, neighbors and relatives. Make sure your child knows how to call 911. Kidshealth.org has a [printable "emergency contact sheet"](#) that you can print out and put where your child can access it easily at.
- **It might also be helpful for them to take a basic first aid course before they are on their own.** The American Red Cross offers [Youth Courses in Basic Aid Training](#).
- **Set up a time each day for your child to call or text you** so you know they have arrived home safely.
- **You also may want to consider removing items that pose safety or poisoning risks.** Safely store away all prescription drugs or over the counter medications that could be harmful if taken in access, alcohol, cigarettes, guns (locked away without ammunition), matches, lighters, etc.
- **For the first few times your child will be arriving home alone, arrange to have a neighbor or a family friend stop by to check in on them.**
- **Always let your children know where you are** -- and if you are going to be late arriving home.

With the proper guidelines, being home for limited periods of time can increase independence, responsibility and confidence in your children. Please make sure they are ready for the challenge. And, one more word of caution. Just because your child can arrive home from school and be alone, does not mean that they are ready to babysit younger siblings. This requires another level of preparation and maturity, babysitting courses and knowing emergency first aid measures and CPR. The American Red Cross has a [babysitter class](#) for children to prepare them for this responsibility.

If your child is not ready to be home alone, parents need to explore all options available to them to them. These include: after school daycare or other programs, community resources, relatives, and neighbors.

If you are concerned about a child who appears to be neglected or inadequately supervised, contact your local child protective services agency. In New York, that number is 1-800-342-3720.

For more information on keeping your child safe visit www.nyspcc.org.