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INFORMATION FROM YOUR PEDIATRICIAN

Determining when your child is ready to stay home alone

Most states do not have laws to guide families on when their child is old enough to be left alone at home for any amount of time. Instead, the decision is left to the family.

When determining readiness, parents should consider their child's feelings and have a plan in place, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP's) parenting book, *Caring for Your School Age Child*.

Until about age 11 or 12, most children are not ready to handle emergencies. The AAP advises parents to find structured supervision for most children until this point. Some children may be mature enough before this age, however.

Only a few states have laws regarding a minimum age for a child to be home alone, and those states leave it to the individual to determine the amount time and the child's well-being, according to the Child Welfare Information Gateway of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Parents can consider the following to determine readiness:

- Is there a law in your state?
- Does your child obey rules and make good decisions, even in emergencies? Does the child know when to call 911?
- Is the child physically and mentally ready?
- How long will the child be alone? If it is during a meal-time, can the child fix a meal?



- How often will the child be left alone?

If the child seems ready, parents should begin with a short separation while the parent remains close. The Child Welfare Information Gateway advises parents to set rules on whether guests are allowed, and suggests that the child and parent review various scenarios and solutions (e.g., stranger at the door, broken window or open door when the child arrives at home, etc.).

Parents also should consider safety issues within the home, the neighborhood and whether neighbors can help in an emergency.

For assistance, parents can contact their local Child Protective Services agency at 800-422-4453.

— Trisha Koriath

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