

KNOW THE RULES...

After-School Safety for Children Who Are Home Alone



Each day millions of children go to an empty home and are alone for an hour or more. Experts estimate that nearly 5 million school-aged children spend time without adult supervision during a typical week.¹ Although the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that school-aged children, ages 5-12, be supervised, for many parents this isn't possible. When faced with this situation, the AAP states that maturity — not age — should be the determining factor in whether a child should be left alone.²

There are a number of important points parents should consider prior to allowing their child to be unsupervised after school. Parents need to assess their child. Does he or she have the personality, self-confidence, and judgment skills to accept this responsibility? Will the experience be positive and help build and enhance the child's self-image, or will the experience promote additional anxiety in the child who may be afraid to stay alone? Having a family conference to discuss the arrangement is a good place to start. House rules, expectations of both parent and child, and a daily routine can be defined. At the end of the day, parents can also use the experience to have regular family meetings to help ensure that the arrangement is still working and identify any alterations that need to be made. Here are some steps that you and your children can take to help ensure a positive after-school experience.

Before allowing your child to go home alone, you should...

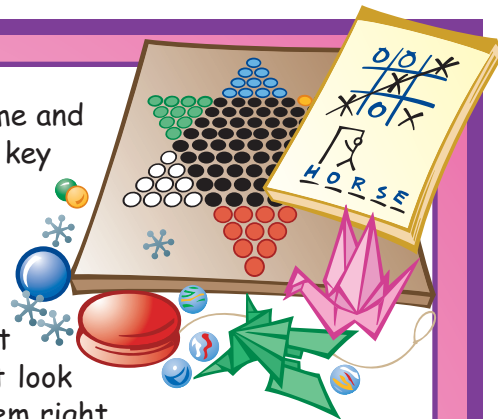
- * determine if there are other community resources or organizations providing after-school care or support.
- * ask your child how he or she feels about being alone. Is your child afraid to be left alone, or does he or she have the maturity and initiative to want to assume that responsibility?
- * decide if you feel that your child can follow directions and solve problems on his or her own.
- * determine how long your child will be alone, how accessible you or another trusted adult will be in case of an emergency, and how safe the neighborhood is by contacting your local law-enforcement agency and checking the incidence of crime in your neighborhood.
- * make sure you've set specific rules that are to be followed by your child while he or she is alone and give your child specific instructions on how to reach you at all times. This should also include information on what to do if your child needs assistance and can't reach you right away.
- * remember that you're in charge, even if it is from a distance.

Once you've decided to proceed, you should check to make sure your child knows...

- ✓ his or her full name, address, and telephone number.
- ✓ your full name, the exact name of the place where you work, your work telephone number, and any pager or cellular telephone numbers that you may have.
- ✓ how to make a telephone call to request help in an emergency using **911** or the appropriate number(s) in your area.



- ✓ how to carry his or her key so that it is hidden and secure. Your name and address should **not** be on the key, and it may be wise to leave an extra key with a trusted friend or neighbor.
- ✓ not to walk or play alone on the way home and never take shortcuts home.
- ✓ what to do if he or she is being followed.
- ✓ to always check out the house before entering, looking for doors that may be ajar, windows that may be broken, or anything that doesn't look right, and go to a safe place to call for help if something doesn't seem right.
- ✓ to always lock the door after entering and make sure that the house is secure.
- ✓ to immediately check in with you upon returning home to let you know that he or she has arrived safely.
- ✓ to tell callers that you can't come to the telephone instead of letting people know that he or she is home alone and offer to take a message.
- ✓ not to open the door for or talk to anyone who comes to the home unless the person is a trusted family friend or relative, he or she feels comfortable being alone with that person, **and** the visit has been pre-approved by you.
- ✓ to stay alert for true emergencies such as a fire or gas-main leak that would require the need to leave the home.
- ✓ to check with you or a trusted adult if he or she is in doubt about anything.



As a parent, you should make sure you have . . .

- a daily schedule of homework, chores, and activities for your child to follow.
- a list kept close to the telephone that includes numbers for you, law enforcement, the fire department, an ambulance service, your doctor, a poison-control center, and a trusted adult who's available in case of an emergency.
- written instructions about which, if any, appliances may be used, what to do in case of fire, and how to get out of the house if there is a fire.
- a plan if you are detained and what to do if your child's plans change.
- instructions about watching television, using a computer, talking on the telephone, and inviting friends over when you aren't home.
- time to discuss the day's events with your child. Make sure he or she knows that it is okay to discuss anything with you, especially something that may have made him or her feel uncomfortable in any way.



¹ *Fact Sheet on School-Aged Children's Out-of-School Time*. Wellesley, Massachusetts: National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, 1998, page 1.
² *Caring for Your School-Age Child: Ages 5-12*. New York, New York: American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999, page 42.

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