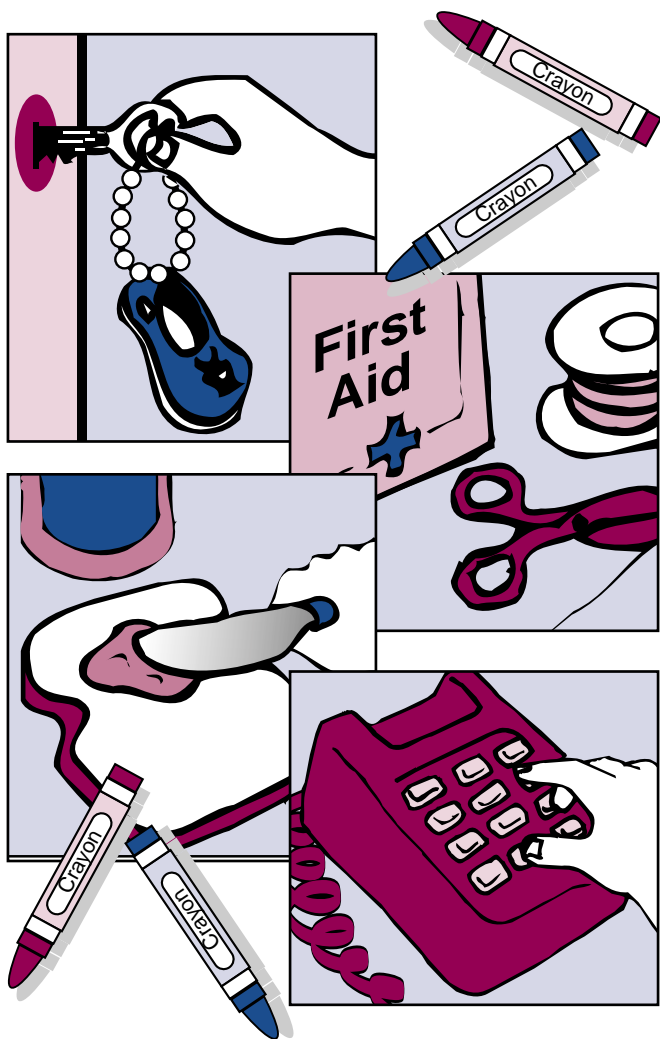


When Your Child Stays Home Alone



**...issues for families
with school-age
children**

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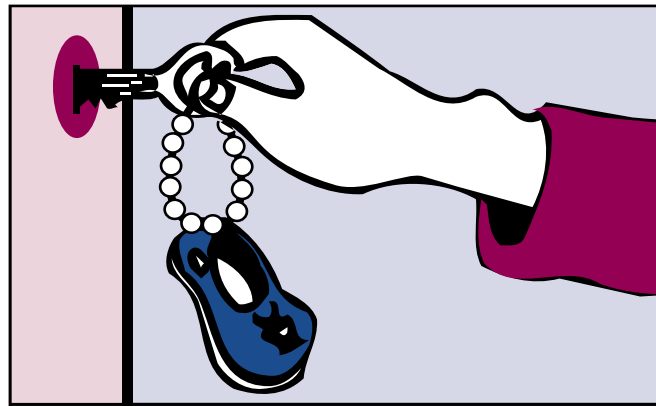


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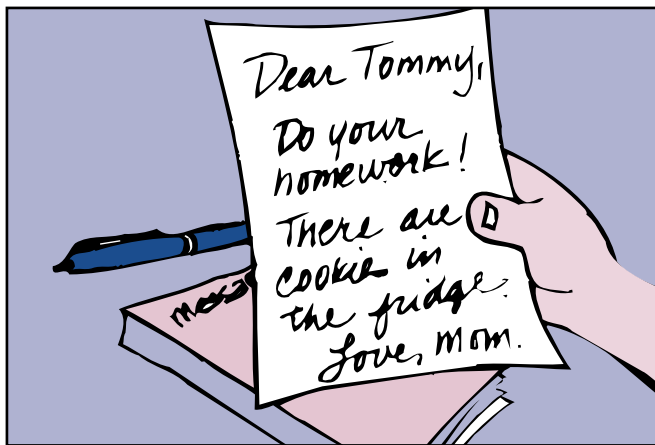
Why?

A generation ago most families didn't need a handbook to help decide whether children should be home alone. Mothers of school-age children were home, or if they weren't, neighbors or a near-by family member could be called. Today, 77% of Ohio mothers of school-age children work outside the home, and the number of single-parent families has grown to one in four. Parents also are choosing to continue their education. In addition, neighborhood mothers work away from home and family members often live in another city.

Some parents allow school-age children to stay home alone, but even after the decision is made, they worry. Is it okay? And at what age? What are the dangers? What are the benefits? The answers aren't easy. This booklet can help parents make good choices for their children. The following questions are addressed:

- What is legal?
- What do we know about children and their needs?
- Is your child ready?
- Are you ready?
- How can you and your child develop a plan for self-care?

Only you as the parent know your child, your neighborhood and your own feelings, **and only you** can make the decision whether he or she can stay home alone.



What's Legal?

There's a reason why parents are puzzled about the question of when children may be left alone. It's because the law is open to interpretation. The law allows courts and social service agencies to intervene in situations where parents fail to do this.

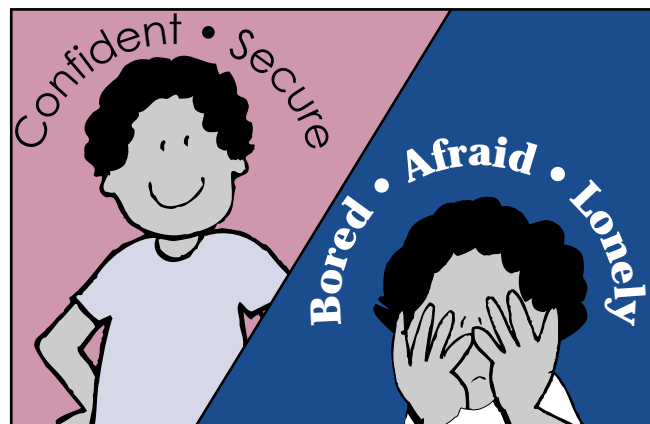
What is proper care and supervision? Each parent wrestles with this question, and again, there is no absolute answer. Ordinarily, children in self care with good planning would not come to the attention of authorities, but in some cases, neighbors or other concerned adults may report suspected neglect to the police or a children services agency.

Columbus police and Franklin County Children Services' workers report that when they receive complaints about children left alone, they investigate to determine if there is a case of neglect. Because Ohio law does not cite a specific age, they look carefully at the individual situation, including:

- Age of the child
- Maturity level
- Time of day child is alone
- Length of time
- Whether an emergency arose while the parent was away

What do we know about children and their needs for supervision?

Studies suggest that children who are home alone may be bored, lonely and afraid. In fact, the number of children who list "being afraid" as their first complaint has risen dramatically since 1991 according to information gathered by PhoneFriend, a "warm line" operated by Action for Children during after-school hours. Break-ins and physical violence are their major concerns...events supported by activities they see in their own neighborhoods and on television. Because fear can be harmful to a child's emotional development, self-care should not be regularly used for children who say they are afraid.

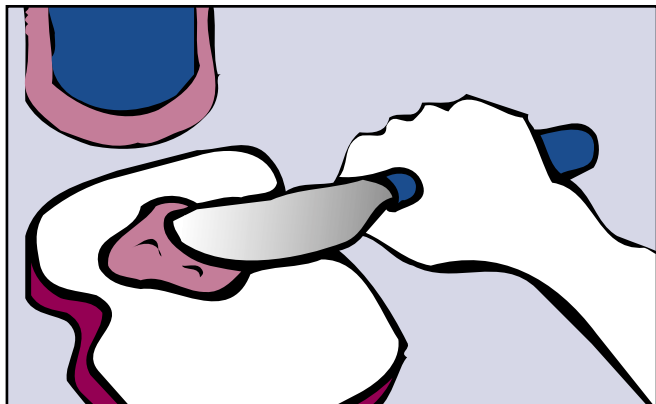


Is your child ready?

As your child matures, you must decide when it is appropriate for him or her to be home alone. Often this begins as a brief time when parents go down the street to talk with a neighbor, then expands to a longer time when parents are working or are in school themselves.

You must evaluate your child's readiness—physical, intellectual and social/emotional maturity—and apply them to your specific situation. For example, if you're thinking about leaving your child alone each day from 3:30

(when school is out) until 5:30, imagine what might occur during this period each day and whether your child is prepared to meet these demands.



Physical readiness. Can your child perform tasks such as:

- Unlocking and re-locking door?
- Dialing a telephone?
- Opening a can or jar?

Additional skills are needed if you expect your child to do chores like laundry or dinner preparation.

Intellectual readiness. Being home alone requires some very specific thinking skills. Can your child:

- Understand time—what it means to say that you will be home in half an hour?
- Take messages?
- Give appropriate information over the telephone?
- Read a written note or instructions that you have left?
- Understand concepts such as “stranger” or “emergency”?

Can your child know when to open the door for a special delivery letter carrier? The gas or electric meter reader? The telephone repairman? A policeman? Other persons? A child can not be expected to make these decisions. Unless you are secure and sure that your child understands your family's rules about strangers, always

rehearse situations to find out about how your child would react. However, this does not guarantee your child will be able to remember and do what you practice.

Can your child assess a situation and decide if help is needed? Discuss possible emergencies with your child with concrete examples of when and how to seek help, but be fully aware that your child may forget what you practiced.



Social/emotional readiness. Perhaps the most critical question to ask is how your child feels about it. No matter what your child says, only you can make the decision as to your child's ability and readiness. Consider:

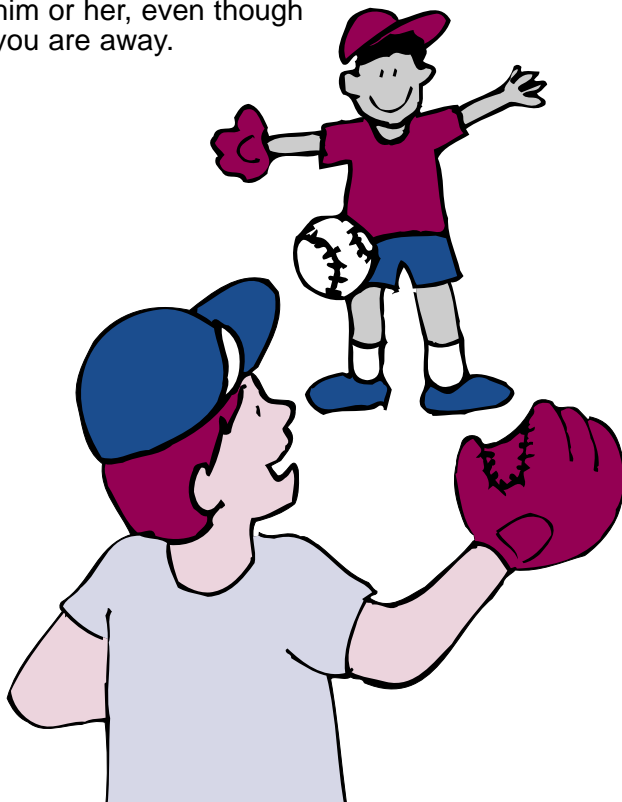
- How your child deals with angry feelings
- How strong is his or her need to be with friends
- Does the child want to talk with adult or parent

At the end of a school day, often children want to talk with a parent or other adult. When your child needs reassurance, arrange for a brief routine telephone call with you or another adult. This contact gives your child a feeling of support even though you are not home.

As you know, your child's social and emotional needs will change. As he or she matures, the idea of being able to stay home alone may be more appealing, and your child will enjoy the privileges and responsibilities that go with additional freedom. You must assess your child-care arrangements.

Flexibility and continuing reassessment are the keys to success.

Anything you can do to show you are thinking about your child will help him or her feel more comfortable during self-care. You can plan after-school activities with your child, prepare a small snack as a surprise, or mail your child a letter that will be there at the end of the day. These are some simple ways to let your child know you are proud of him or her for being so responsible and that you are thinking of him or her, even though you are away.



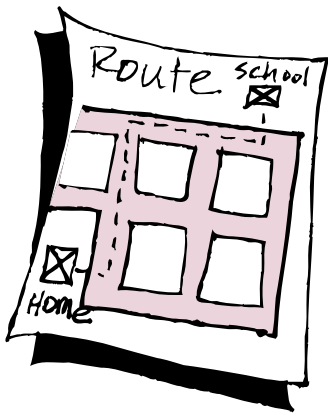
Are you ready?

After you've thought about your child's readiness to be home alone, consider your own feelings and attitudes; and consider some common issues that will affect your perceptions about self-care. For example:

- Why are you entertaining the idea of self-care?
- What are your feelings about working outside the home?
- Are you comfortable with the idea of self-care for your child?
- Are you ready for your child to be more independent?
- Are you satisfied everyone is prepared for self-care?

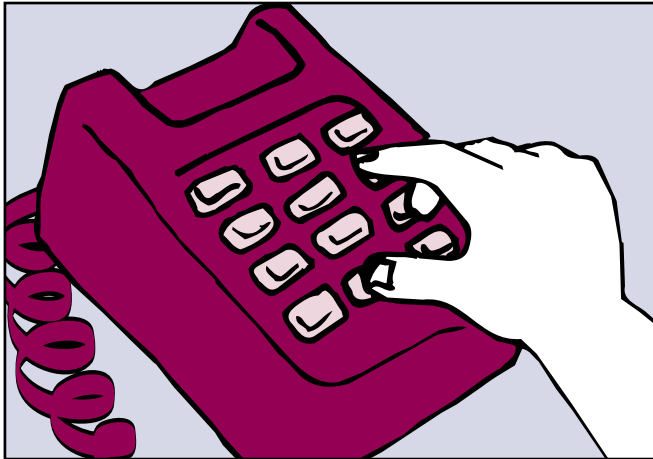
How can you and your child develop a plan of self-care?

If you've decided to try self-care with your child, you must design a plan. You can begin with a family meeting to discuss procedures and expectations, then continue meeting regularly to plan activities and schedules, and to evaluate how self-care is working for your family. Here are some issues to consider:



Safety Rules

Coming home after school. Establishing a regular route and time for coming home from school is important. This is a basic safety precaution for all children, even if they're not in self-care. Should doors and windows be locked if no one is home? When your child arrives and the doors are unlocked, should there be a procedure established to go to a neighbor's to get help or to use the phone? Should your child not enter an unlocked house until it is checked? Should you teach your child to re-lock the door once inside?



Checking in. Establish a check-in procedure so children have an adult to talk with when they get home. Phone calls provide a reassuring link and also let parents know that children have arrived home safely.

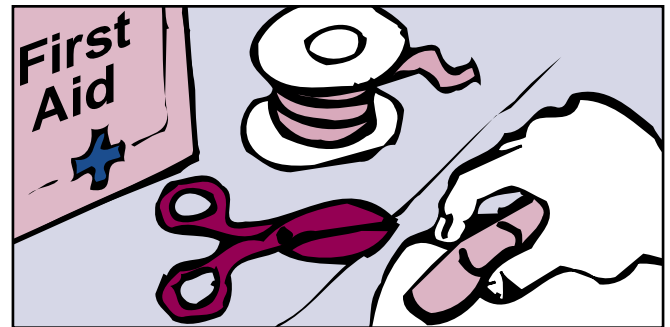


Pets. Consider pets as providers of security and companionship for the child who is home alone. A dog who barks at strangers provides a warning that someone is nearby. Pets can also provide comfort to a lonely child.

Answering the door or telephone.

Establishing procedures for visitors and calls is one of the most basic safety rules for children home alone. Police officials agree that children should never tell a stranger when they are home alone; and when someone comes to the door, the door should not be opened. Phone calls are easier to handle. Give your child a phrase to use when strangers call. "I'm sorry, my parent is busy and cannot come to the phone. May I take a message?" Rehearse with your child so he or she is more comfortable.

Code word. Establish a simple "code word" with your child. This is important when an emergency or unexpected delay on your part occurs and you are unable to speak directly to your child. If the message needs to be delivered by another adult, share the code word with that person. Your child knows the message is



legitimate and coming directly from you when the code word is used.

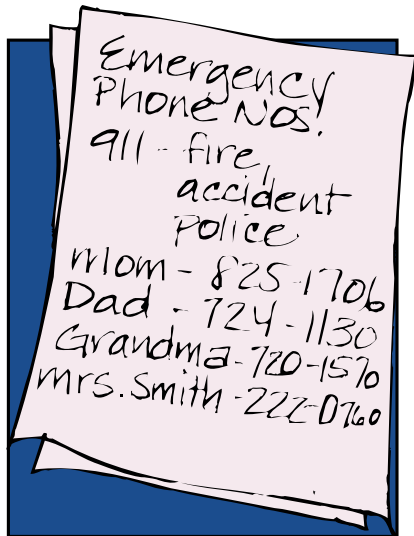
First aid and emergencies. When you decide a child is old enough to stay home alone and has enough skill to handle the cuts and scrapes that inevitably occur, put together a small kit of first-

aid cream, band-aids and an ice-bag. Establish a procedure in case the injury is more severe.

Fire and tornado safety. Practice and discuss routines to help your child act calmly and sensibly if a fire occurs, including written escape routes. Help your child to know and recognize the neighborhood tornado siren and where to go in the house in case of a tornado warning. Flashlights and battery-operated radios are also needed in case power is out, helping your child feel more secure (and provide safety information) when the weather is scary.

Safety people.

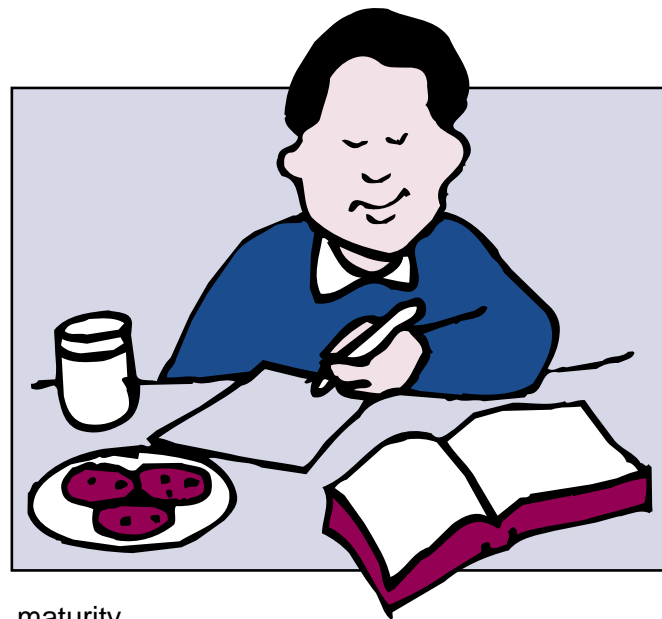
Post a list of names and telephone numbers for your child in case of an emergency or if the child needs reassurance.



Planning things to do

Boredom and loneliness may be problems for children home alone. A little planning will help establish the best activities and routines for your child.

Play rules. Decide where, when and with whom your child may play. Indoors? Outdoors? In his or her own yard? On the block? What about going to a friend's house? What about having friends at your house? How many? What activities are "off limits?" Naturally, the neighborhood and child's

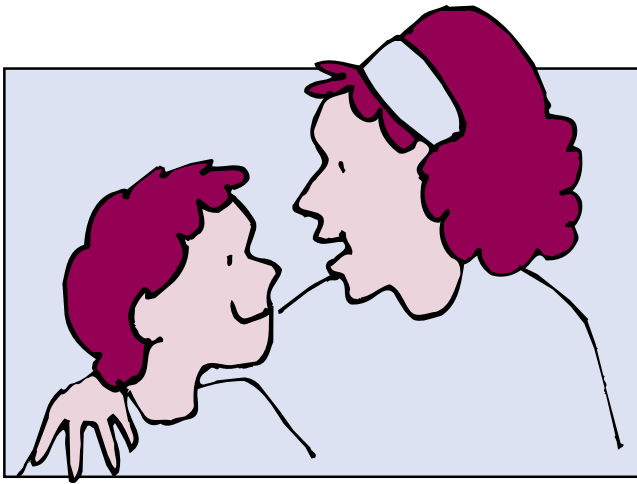


maturity will help provide answers. These rules need to be reviewed and revised as friends and situations change.

Homework. There is also homework to consider. Some parents expect homework to be done in the afternoon so families have time together in the evenings...others want to be home to help. Decide what works for you and make the expectations clear.

Snacks and television. Good snacks and relaxation are things a child looks forward to after a day at school. Decide whether your child may use the stove or oven, and what snacks are allowed. If you can plan snacks ahead of time, it will help with the grocery shopping, too. Television is something you'll have trouble monitoring when you're not home. State your preferences for programming and amount of time, but don't make rules you can't enforce.

Other activities. When possible, make arrangements for children to participate in school activities and recreation programs. This is an important part of your child's growth and with pre-planning these activities can relieve the boredom of a self-care arrangement. Other families have household chores expected of older children—laundry, dusting, feeding the pet,



straightening their rooms. These are good after-school activities and when done well, children deserve an occasional reward.

Regular maintenance.

If self-care is working well for you and your family, keep meeting and talking. If it's not working well, keep meeting and talking. Plan the activities, plan the snacks, and practice the safety procedures. As your child grows and becomes more responsible, rules should change and more and more privileges given. This is part of the routine communication that makes a successful family—and a successful self-care arrangement.

Referral Services & Resources

- Child Care
Action for Children 614/224-0222

- In Delaware County:
Action for Children 740/369-0649
at Andrews House 740/548-0649

- Publicly-Funded Child-Care Information
Franklin County
Dept. of Human
Services 614/462-3375

- Community Services
FIRSTLINK 614/221-6841

- After-School Warmline
PhoneFriend 614/566-4044

Additional Reading

Bergstrom, Joan M. *School's Out! Afternoons, Weekends, Vacation.*

Berkeley CA: Ten Speed Press, 1990.

Practical information and guidelines to help plan a child's time out of school.

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