

## Staying Home Alone: Is your child ready?

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### Making the decision: When is a child ready to be home alone?

Personality characteristics, skills, and maturity are useful criteria for determining a child's readiness to be home alone. Personality doesn't generally change much with age, although children can learn to modify some of their reactions as they learn what is expected of them. There are some children who find it very difficult to be alone, some who need time and gradual exposure to become accustomed to being by themselves, and some who adapt easily.

### The personality characteristics of the child who is ready

The child who

- is not fearful, feels at ease in the world and self-confident
- is calm, not excitable, when something unexpected happens
- is outgoing, talks about his or her feelings and thoughts readily with parents and others
- admits wrongdoing, even when expecting disapproval
- has courage enough to resist pressure from friends and others

The rate at which children acquire the skills and the milestones of maturity varies, but the following provide some general guidance.

### The skills of the child who is ready

The child who

- can clearly state and spell his or her full name, address and telephone number
- can clearly state his or her parents' names, employers, addresses of work places, work telephone numbers
- knows how to dial 911 and give information
- knows not to enter home if it looks suspicious
- knows what to do if he or she is followed
- knows not to play alone outside the home
- knows how to answer the telephone when alone at home
- knows what to do in case of fire
- knows what to do if smoke or carbon monoxide detectors go off
- plays "What if?" games with his or her parents
- helps to make the family's rules and knows the emergency back-up plan.

## The environment and readiness: the neighborhood and the family

In addition to the child's readiness to be alone before or after school, certain characteristics of the home environment need to be considered. Some of these are easy to control; some are not:

- The safety of the neighborhood, -- can a child safely walk home, or get from the bus to the door without risk?
- Are there adults nearby and accessible, always available, and familiar to the child or children? Is there a backup plan?
- How much time is involved? How long must the child be alone? Is there a planned structure of activities planned for the time alone?
- Are there siblings? Pets? What are the ages of the siblings?
  
- **Is the home equipped:**
  - dead bolts,
  - fire extinguishers,
  - smoke detectors,
  - first aid kit,
  - evacuation plan,
  - emergency phone numbers by the telephone,
  - flashlights and batteries,
  - money in a hiding place known to the child,
  - lights on timers so that the child doesn't get home to a dark home in winter,
  - all liquor locked,
  - a cell phone for the child with the important numbers in it
  - a hidden key or a key left with a reliable neighbor who is sure to be home
  
- Is there time to set aside every single day for a quiet talk, a review of the day, an opportunity to tell the child how wonderfully responsible he or she is, and a willingness to help the child with whatever is current in her or his life, homework, a problem with another child at school, a wish for a special snack?