

Home Alone?

LEAVING CHILDREN HOME ALONE

The State of New Jersey does not specify any appropriate, legal age to leave a child or children home alone.

The Bergen County Office for Children understands the inadequate supply and prohibitively high cost of child care, not just in Bergen County but nationwide, and also understands a parent's dilemma of having to choose between absence from work or leaving a child home alone. The parent must make a very personal and individual decision.

The Office for Children was established in 1980 to serve as a voice for children. We must, therefore, stress the importance of placing the health and safety needs of the child first.

There is no developmentally appropriate age at which a child can be left home alone without adult supervision. There are many factors to consider when making the decision for your family. Please consider the following:

1. How often will your child be left home alone?

There is a big difference between leaving your child home once in a great while or every day. Even teens can suffer from being alone every day after school for three to five hours. Children, including adolescents, need adult supervision on a daily basis for companionship and guidance. Feelings of loneliness, isolation, shyness, or poor social skills may develop in a child who is alone for several hours each day. The child who responsibly functions well alone may be the most in need of companionship.

How long will the child be alone, and over what period of time? You may feel that your child can handle being alone for an hour while you run errands, but not feel comfortable leaving him/her alone for a longer stretch of time. While being home alone for a couple of hours after school for a week or two could be a welcome break for a child, months or years of being alone for those same couple of hours per day could have serious social and emotional implications for the child.

2. Would the child be required to care for younger siblings?

Children and adolescents do not have the proper knowledge and experience to be left alone to care for younger siblings on a regular basis. Emotional and physical abuse often occurs in situations when older children are given the enormous responsibility of overseeing the safety of young children every day. While occasional babysitting

can build responsibility and encourage nurturing, children and adolescents need to have the opportunity to experience childhood themselves before taking on the burden of caring for others on a frequent basis.

3. Can you implement self-care slowly?

Can you leave your child alone for short periods of time and gradually work up to self-care for longer periods of time? Have you had the chance to evaluate the way the child has handled self-care in the past?

Children should not be left home alone if they cannot do the following:

- Carry out responsibilities according to parental directions
- Use good judgment
- Confide in parent regarding problems in school or at home
- Get along well with parent
- Get along well with siblings
- Display excellent personal safety and first aid skills

Also consider:

- Can the child reach you easily by phone at all times?
- Are there other adults nearby who can help the child?
- Does the child feel comfortable staying home alone?
- Does the child express fears about being home alone?
- Is the neighborhood generally safe?

If you decide to leave your child home alone ...

1. Establish rules to be followed and sign a written agreement with the child. Make sure your too have rules to follow, such as always being available by phone or being home on time.
2. Establish permitted activities. Devise a daily schedule for the child to follow. For example: 3 p.m. snack, 3:30 outside (if safe), 4:30 homework, 5 p.m. chores or T.V.
3. Establish safety, accident and health policies. Make sure emergency phone numbers is posted and telephone rules are set. Decide if cooking or use of other appliances is acceptable.
4. Discuss situations that may occur. Talk with your child. Listen to his/her problem solving skills. Don't lecture.
5. Decide how pet care, having friends over, going outside or answering the door should be handled.
6. Talk the situation over with your spouse or another adult. Sometimes it helps to see the situation more objectively.
7. Designate a willing neighbor to respond to any emergency until you arrive.

8. Sign up your child for scouts, 4-H, or other after school activities. See if a friend's parents will provide transportation. Offer to "take your turn" by caring for his/her children on a weekend, or originate another "bartering" arrangement.