

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Tips for Leaving Your Child Home Alone

For a variety of reasons, you may need or want to leave your child home alone, either occasionally or on a regular basis after school. However, it's important to determine whether your child is ready for this big responsibility.

Laws in your area will determine the age that a child may legally be left alone. However, there are additional considerations to weigh before making the final decision to leave your child at home alone while you're out:

- Is your child confident or fearful by nature?
- Is your child able and willing to follow verbal instructions?
- Is your child able to read written instructions, names and phone numbers?
- Is your child comfortable using the phone?
- Would your child remember to follow instructions in an emergency?
- Will your child be caring for younger siblings or pets while home alone?

Plan Ahead

The decision to leave your child alone at home also requires careful preparation to ensure that the experience is a happy and safe one for everyone. Before leaving your child alone for the first time, consider the following safety precautions:

- Check to make sure that the furnace and major appliances are in good working order.
- Teach your child to lock doors and open windows.
- Teach your child how to make simple snacks and clean up afterwards.
- Show your child where first aid supplies are kept and review basic first aid principles.
- Prepare an emergency kit with a flashlight and battery-operated radio, in case of power blackouts.

Emergency Preparedness

Make sure your child knows how to reach you and your spouse at the workplace. If you have speed dial, program your work numbers in. Instruct your child to phone you or your spouse the moment he or she arrives home. Remind your child each morning whom should be called and where.

Keep a list of emergency numbers by every phone. Include numbers of neighbors or close family friends who have agreed to provide support if problems arise.

Also, make sure your child knows the key safety rules for staying home alone, such as:

- When you are safely home each day, lock the front door behind you.
- Stay home until your parent arrives back, unless your parent has given you permission to go out.
- If the phone rings, say that your parent is in the shower. Never let a caller know that you are home alone.
- If someone knocks at the door, do not open it. If a person at the door won't go away, call 911.
- If there is smoke, fire or a gas smell, leave the house and call 911.

Phasing-in the Responsibility

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Before making the big leap, let your child practice being home alone. Arrange to be home when he or she comes back from school. Give him or her the door key and tell him or her to come into the house alone. Let your child try calling your spouse at the office. Tell your child to make a snack and tidy up afterwards.
Then, arrange for short time periods of him or her being home alone, such as while you go to the store.

On the first day that you leave your child home alone after school, arrange to come home a little early to ensure that everything is going well.

Ultimately, you can help your child adjust to being home alone by helping him or her to create an after-school schedule for homework, snacking and TV. You may want to call home more than once during the first few days. With the preparedness guidelines outlined in this article and some trial periods, you and your child will soon be more comfortable with him or her being alone in the house.