

# PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

[www.parentline.org.au](http://www.parentline.org.au)



## Home Alone

### REMEMBER:

- Check how safe your home is.
- Have clear ground rules.
- Base your decision on your child's general behaviour, maturity and understanding.
- Think about how long you will be away.
- Consider who will be in charge while you are away.
- Be prepared: take precautions as much as possible.
- Make sure your child has all the information they might need.

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## When is it safe to leave children at home by themselves?

Parents are often left with a dilemma about when it is appropriate to leave children alone at home. Since there is limited direction from the law about this issue, parents are often left feeling very concerned about when it is the right time.

While the law does not set an age for children to be left at home, it is the responsibility of parents to ensure that their children are safe.

If you are thinking of leaving your child alone, here are some issues that you need to consider:

### How safe is your home?

There are many things that can happen quickly when children are at home alone. It is important to think about what risks children might have access to. For example, medications, saucepans, fireplaces, and swimming pools. Make sure that these things are out of reach or inaccessible.

### Are the ground rules clear?

It is important that children are clear about what they can and can't do in the house. Think about both your general house rules and especially those that apply when you are not there.

For example, is it appropriate and safe for your child to do things like making a hot drink, turning on the heater or running a bath while you are away?

### What is your child like generally?

If your child has a severe behaviour problems, has shown you they are not responsible in the past, or they are a risk taker, then it would be unwise to leave them at home alone.

## How long will you be away?

How long you will be away will make a huge difference to what you decide to do. Some issues that you need to consider are the age and development of the child, how they feel about being left, and most importantly how capable they are.

Consider whether they are able to feed and care for themselves, their general ability to problem-solve if issues arise, and their emotional responses to unfamiliar situations.

## Who will be in charge?

It is not always appropriate to expect older children to take on the responsibility of caring for younger children. They may find it difficult to control the behaviour of young children appropriately.

It is important for the child left in charge to be capable and responsible and that the other child feels safe.

The child in charge should be able to handle any disagreements or fights and know what to do if the other children play up, disobey the ground rules or are ill.

The oldest child is not necessarily the most capable to provide this level of care.

## What precautions can you take?

Many parents decide against leaving children at home because there are so many issues to consider. Others agree to do so with extra precautions put in place.

For example, you might ask a trusted friend or neighbour to care for the children part of the time you are away.

Another option is to arrange to check in with or your children call you at a particular time e.g. at bedtime, or every 2 hours.

If you do leave your child home alone, make sure they know:

- Where you will be.
- How to get in contact with you.
- How you are going and when you'll be back.
- How to use the telephone.
- Where emergency numbers are listed.
- Their own telephone number and home address.
- The telephone number of trusted friends, neighbours or family.
- Where to find the first aid kit and how to use it.
- How to use deadlocks.
- What to do in case of fire.
- What to do if someone knocks on the door.
- Whether or not they should answer the phone if it rings.
- How to judge if they or another child is unwell and help is needed.
- How to contact the doctor, hospital, police or fire brigade.
- Family and house rules (how many friends are allowed, can they play outside, can they use the swimming pool, can they go to the shop or visit the neighbour, rules about family pets).

*Adapted from "Parenting – the most important job in the world" 1999 NSW Department of Community Services*