

## Home Alone

Whether it's an unexpected snow day or a summer break from school, almost every parent is faced with the decision of whether and when to leave a child home alone. Many people look to the law for help in making this decision, but **there is no "legal age" in Pennsylvania when a child can or should be left alone.** It's up to parents to assess their child and living situation and decide what's best for their family.

Being trusted to stay home alone can be a positive experience for a child who is mature and well-prepared; it can boost self-esteem and promote responsibility. However, children face real risks when left unsupervised. If they are not mature and prepared enough to handle situations that may come up while they're alone, children may be frightened, injured or at risk of other harm. Leaving a child alone can be considered child neglect, especially if doing so puts the child in danger.

How does a parent make this important decision? Here are some things to consider:

- **Age and maturity** – Children mature at different rates, so age is only one factor. Consider how your child has shown responsibility in the past. Is your child physically and mentally able to care for himself? Does your child obey rules and make good decisions?
- **Your child's feelings** – Talk with your child to find out whether he is afraid to be home alone. How comfortable is he?
- **Time** – When and how a child is left home alone can make a difference to his safety and success. How long will your child be alone at one time? Will it be during the day or evening, at meal times or bed time? How often will your child be home alone?
  - **Other children** – Children who are ready to stay home alone may not be ready to care for younger siblings. How many children will be in the home without an adult? How do the children get along and how capable is the older child of caring for younger ones?
  - **Safety** – Assess your home and think about any safety hazards that your child may come across. How safe is your neighborhood? Do you have a safety plan for emergencies, and can your child follow this plan? Does your child know his address, phone number and how to call 911 if needed? Can he contact you at all times if needed? Who else is available to help in an emergency (a neighbor, for example)?

Once you have determined that your child is ready to stay home alone, here are some suggestions to help you prepare your child and to help you feel more comfortable about him being home alone:

- **Have a trial period** – Leave your child alone for a short time while you are nearby and see how she manages.
- **Role play** – Act out possible situations to help your child learn what to do.
- **Establish rules** – Make sure your child knows what is (and what is not) allowed when you are not home. Many parents find that having a chore list to keep kids busy is a good strategy.
- **Check in** – Call your child while you are gone, or have a friend stop by to check on your child.
- **Talk about your child's feelings** – Encourage your child to share his feelings about staying home alone and address any concerns he has.
- **Don't overdo it** – Even a mature, responsible child should not be alone too much or too often. Consider after school programs, community centers or church activities to help keep your child busy and supervised when you are away from home.

Parents should remember that the safety of a child should always be the first priority! For more information on helping your child be home alone, visit the parenting section of our website- [www.pa-fsa.org](http://www.pa-fsa.org).

*Adapted from "Leaving Your Child Home Alone," Child Welfare Information Gateway. v*