

Home alone

Parent easy guide 32



It's not easy to decide the right time or age to leave children at home on their own.

There is no actual law stating the age children can be left at home alone. However the law is clear that parents are responsible for their children's safety and they should not be left in dangerous situations.

There are many things to think about when deciding whether your children should be left at home without you, such as safety, your children's ages, how mature and capable they are, and whether they could cope in an emergency. It's important to have 'ground rules' and that your children understand them.

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.
Change to suit your child's sex.*

What does the law say?

There is no actual law that states at what age children can or cannot be left alone, but the law is clear about the responsibility of parents to look after their children. In many cultures it is usual for children to care for brothers and sisters. While different societies have different customs, in Australia there is a legal duty for parents to make sure that their children are properly looked after.

- > Parents are expected to provide food, clothing, a place to live, safety and supervision (Family Law Act).
- > Parents can be charged with an offence if children are left in a dangerous situation and are not fed, clothed or provided with somewhere to live (Criminal Law Consolidation Act).
- > The Police or Families SA (part of the Department of Families and Communities) can remove children from situations where their safety is in serious danger and there is no guardian present (Children's Protection Act).

Can parents leave older children in charge?

When a person under the age of 18 years (for example, an older brother, sister or teenage friend) cares for children, the question of negligence or liability could arise. As a parent you may be held responsible for the carer, as well as your own children, if something goes wrong. For these reasons it is better that carers are adults (over the age of 18 years). A carer who is still legally a child (ie under 18 years) would not be judged against the standards of responsibility expected of adults.

If you decide to leave your children in the care of an older brother or sister or other young person, you must be sure that they are reliable and mature. Ask yourself 'Could this child cope with an emergency such as a fire, an accident or a break-in?'

If your child is left alone without a 'carer', he must be old enough to take action in an emergency and know what to do and where to get help.



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Questions to ask yourself

These are some of the questions to ask yourself in you're thinking of leaving your children at home alone.

How safe is our home?

Accidents happen so quickly and most parents know how easily a child can fall into a pool, pull saucepans off the stove, swallow objects or play with matches. Parents always have to be on the alert, especially with young children. There is an even greater need to check that dangerous things are out of reach if you're not going to be there.

Are the ground rules clear?

Every family has its own ground rules. It is important to be clear about what children can and cannot do and these rules may be different when you are not there or when someone else is minding your children. For example, making a hot drink, turning on the heater, running the bath, using the toaster may seem simple tasks when you are there, but you may decide not to allow them when you're away. If your children are home alone will your rules change for making or answering phone calls, using mobile phones or going on the internet?

Do not assume that your children know the rules. Ask them to tell you what they are and show you what they would do.

How long will I be away?

Will it be for a few minutes, an hour, a morning or a full day? How long you are going to be away will make a difference to what you decide to do. You need to think about the age of your children, how they feel about being left and most importantly how capable they are.

What about babies and toddlers?

Babies and toddlers should never be left home alone.

It is never OK to leave babies and toddlers home alone, even for a short time. Babies, toddlers and young children have a different sense of time from adults. An hour is not long for an adult but to your young child it is endless and even this short absence could cause distress. It is also unsafe. What would happen if you left your sleeping baby at home while you picked up your toddler from kindergarten and you had an accident?

Who will be in charge?

It is not fair to expect an older child to take on the full responsibility required to care for younger children. Their lack of experience may make it difficult for them to find ways of trying to control others. They may be harsh and might use very different methods from what you use and situations can get out of hand.

Any child left in charge must be capable and responsible and the other children must feel safe in their care. The child in charge should be able to handle any disagreements or fights and know what to do if the other children 'play up', not follow the ground rules, or are ill. The oldest child is not always the most capable to care for other children. A child with a disability requires extra care which may be too much for another child to handle.

Am I sure that my child knows?

- > Where I will be going and when I'll be back.
- > How to contact me.
- > How to use the telephone.
- > Where the emergency numbers are listed. Put them next to the phone.
- > How to contact the doctor, hospital, police or fire brigade in an emergency (i.e. to dial 000).
- > His own telephone number and home address. Police or Fire will need to know where to go.
- > The telephone numbers of trusted friends, neighbours or family.
- > Where to find the first aid kit and how to use it.
- > How to use keys in deadlocks and how to unbolt them.
- > What to do in case of fire. Do you have smoke alarms installed, a fire extinguisher and a fire blanket?
- > What to do if someone knocks on the door. Are they allowed to go to the door in your absence, if so, what can they say?
- > Whether or not he should answer the phone if it rings.
- > How to judge if another child is unwell and help is needed.
- > What children are allowed/not allowed to do (family rules in a parent's absence).
- > If friends are allowed over (let the parents of friends know that they are home alone).
- > If he can play outside.
- > If he can use the swimming pool.
- > If he can go to the shop or visit a neighbour.
- > The rules about the family pets.
- > If we have a family password that can be said if I phone and he needs help, or a code to use if I phone to check on him and when one of the rules is not to answer the phone. (e.g. so he knows it's you calling, make three rings, hang up and ring again, before he picks up the phone.)

When you think about all the things a child left home needs to know and be able to do, the responsibility is enormous. Think carefully about expecting your child to be able to handle these situations – is it reasonable?

When the time is right

There comes a time when children and young people start pleading with you to let them stay home alone without someone to look after them. This is a normal part of growing up when young people are trying to feel more adult and independent. Once again, the age and maturity of your children will make a difference. For example, you may feel very confident with a 13 year old who is very responsible and quite worried about a 16 year old who may try to take risks. Letting go of the reins slowly might mean giving your children chances to practice being by themselves for short periods and gain their sense of independence.

The section *Questions To Ask Yourself* still applies to all children and young people.

Getting prepared

Discuss beforehand some emergency scenarios. Ask what he would do if he smelled smoke or if someone came to the door. Test them on the family ground rules.

Check the safety of your home including things like alcohol, car keys, lighters, matches and medication.

Write down instructions and keep them by the phone. Make sure your home phone number and address, emergency number, and information about how to contact you are all by the phone.

Create a list of friends your child can call or things you child can do if lonely. Remember that pets can be great company.

If friends are allowed over, let their parents know that you won't be home.

What about leaving children in cars?

Children should never be left alone in cars.

Leaving your child in a car unsupervised at any time is extremely dangerous and not recommended.

- > In summer the heat in a car is much hotter than outside and your child can quickly suffer heat exhaustion and become very ill.
- > Children get bored and can explore the car's knobs and buttons which can lead to dangers.
- > Children can become distressed or may try to struggle free from their seatbelts and become injured.
- > They may be in danger of someone trying to steal the car with them in it, or they may be taken from the car by someone.

Reminders

- > Check the safety of your home.
- > Test your children on the family ground rules.
- > Be very careful who cares for your children.
- > If you are going out, place someone in charge who is able to handle any emergency and who knows where to get help.
- > Check that each child feels safe with the person left in charge.
- > Phone regularly to check on your children.
- > Return home when you said you would.

Contacts

Parent Helpline: Tel 1300 364 100
24 hours a day, 7 days a week for advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Centres: Tel 1300 733 606
9am–4.30pm, Monday to Friday to make an appointment at your local Centre

Kids Helpline: Tel 1800 55 1800
For children and young people, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Kidsafe SA: Tel (08) 8161 6318

Legal Help Line: Tel 1300 366 424
9am–4.30pm, Monday to Friday

Websites

www.parenting.sa.gov.au
For other Parent Easy Guides

www.cyh.com
For parenting and child health information

www.kidsafe.com.au
For information about children's safety.

For more information

Parent Helpline 1300 364 100

Parenting SA
Children, Youth and Women's Health Service
Telephone (08) 8303 1660
Internet: www.parenting.sa.gov.au

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Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia

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