

# Safe at Home (Alone)

**At some point in a child's life, he or she will be at home alone.** Ideally, your child will be responsible enough to handle the situation. Here's what you need to make that happen: worry-free home-alone strategies.

By Emily Harris

**Y**ou're packing up your things at the office and logging off your computer when your phone rings. It's your boss, who tells you to settle in for the next few hours. Your firm has the advantage in winning a big client and you're expected to stick around to help seal the deal. Then your 12-year-old son calls: He's cut his finger and isn't sure what to do next.

Good thing the two of you have talked about this before. You find out more about his wound — it's not serious and won't require a visit to the emergency department. So you gently remind him of how to take care of a cut with the supplies he'll find in the first aid kit, located right by the sink.

It's a good idea to have a plan for when the children are at home alone, says Robert Sege, M.D. Ph.D, FAAP, director of ambulatory pediatrics at Boston Medical Center. Regardless of age, that plan should ideally include an adult who is closer to home when mom or dad can't be.

A lot of parents think having their kids call their cell phone is a fail-safe plan, Sege says. But when you're across town, unavailable, or the call is dropped, your kids need a person who can get to them quickly. They may need someone who can physically help them, he says.

"On our fridge we have the names and phone numbers of three close neighbors and chances are, one of those is going to be home most of the time," Dr. Sege says. "The neighbors never minded and we did the same thing for them. And we have had



# Parent Tips

## Emergency numbers

- Post the names and numbers of three neighbors and family members who live nearby
- Post your work and cell numbers (even if your child knows your cell by heart, if they are injured or panicked, they might forget)
- Post emergency numbers such as 9-1-1

## First Aid

- Bandages
- Antiseptic cream

## Phone calls

- Have a script for telemarketers and other callers, such as “Mom’s not available, can I take a message?”
- Remind kids not to tell callers that you’re not home.

## 911

- Make sure your children know when to call 9-1-1.

## Alarm systems

- Show them how to turn it off and on

## Cooking

- Show them, do it with them, then let them cook while you watch — and no gourmet meals.



kids over at our house when they get locked out of their home. They'll have a cup of cocoa while somebody finds a key."

## When Is “Home Alone” Okay?

Most states don't have laws about the ages at which kids can be home alone. “It depends on the age and maturity of the child,” says Dr. Sege, who is also a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Committee on Injury, Violence, and Poison Prevention. He says most kids in fourth or fifth grade are ready to be left alone for brief periods; however, he encourages parents to make sure their children aren't scared of being alone in the home.

Before children are left alone, it's best to do a practice run. Show and tell them what to expect and what to do if the phone rings or the power goes out. Let them talk you through what they'd do.

Make sure they know how to use the phone (landline and cell), how to shut off the alarm system, and where the flashlights are kept. Make sure they know their name and address (as well as when to give it out and when not to!). When you are both comfortable, start out with brief periods alone — a run to the grocery store or bank, for example — and then gradually extend the time apart. They need to know what to do in case of an emergency, too, Dr. Sege says.

## Basic rules

Your child should call you when he gets home. A daily check-in call, Dr. Sege says, gives the parent and child a chance to have a 2- to 3-minute “how was your day” chat. She can e-mail or text you, too. This also establishes a routine and helps give both parent and child some peace of mind.

As children get older, it becomes even more important to make rules about what's acceptable, such as having other kids over and how many can visit. This becomes crucial as children become teenagers. “It's the after-school time that's really the most difficult — that's when a lot of mischief can happen, between 3 and 6 p.m.,” Dr. Sege says.

Set limits on television viewing. “The thing I see in my practice that I don't like is the kids who go to school, go home, watch TV, and wait for their parents to come home. They don't really have playtime with other children,” Dr. Sege says.

Arrange for kid time, he says. “The way you develop social skills and ways to interact with people is by doing it and if you think about a kid's life at school . . . I think it's pretty universal, teachers don't want you talking during class, you have 20 minutes for lunch and recess, so how do you do all of the things that really help you grow up?”

## Is It Right for Your Child?

Dr. Sege says parents should ask themselves what their child is doing after school and if being home alone the best choice. “It's certainly easy and many parents feel very comfortable if their child is at home alone but for the child . . . there may be other experiences that he or she could be having.”

Look into after-school programs run by the school, the local YMCA, Boy's & Girl's Club or arts league, or child care programs that offer drop-off/pick-up programs for elementary age children. “Try to think a little bit out of the box about what your individual child enjoys,” he says.

Sports can be an option, too. Sports provide the opportunity to make friends and belong to a group or learn a skill, Dr. Sege says. ●