

KNOW THE RULES...AFTER-SCHOOL SAFETY FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE HOME ALONE

Although the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends adult supervision for children until about the age of 11 or 12, for some families this isn't possible. When faced with this situation, the maturity of the child can help guide whether a child should be left alone. Assess your child. Does he or she have the personality, self-confidence, and judgment skills to accept this responsibility? Will the experience be positive and help build the child's self-image? Will the experience create anxiety in a child who is afraid to stay alone? Having a family meeting to talk about this is a good place to start. House rules, expectations and the daily routine of each family member should be defined.

Before allowing your child to go home alone, you should...

- Find out if there are other community resources or organizations providing after-school care or support. Or places your child can go at least some days for activities and support.
- Ask your child how he or she feels about being alone. Is your child afraid to be left alone, or does he or she have the maturity and want to assume that responsibility?
- Decide if you feel your child is able to follow directions and solve problems on his or her own.
- Decide how long your child will be alone. Think about how available you or another trusted adult will be in case of an emergency. See how safe the neighborhood is by contacting your local law-enforcement agency and checking the frequency and types of crime in your area.
- Make sure you've set specific rules to be followed by your child while he or she is alone. Give your child specific instructions about how to reach you at all times. Include information about what your child should do if they can't reach you right away. Remember you're in charge, even if it is from a distance.

Once you've decided to proceed, you should check to make sure your child knows...

- His or her full name, address, and telephone number and your full name, the exact name of the place where you work, your work number, and any pager or cell numbers you may have.
- How to make a call to request help in an emergency using **911** or the appropriate number(s) in your area.
- How to carry his or her key so it is hidden and safe. Your name and address should **not** be on the key. It may be wise to leave an extra key with a trusted friend or neighbor.
- Not to walk or play alone on the way home, and never take shortcuts home.
- What to do if he or she is being followed. If that happens your child should turn around, run in the opposite direction. They should then go to a designated place to get help and tell a trusted adult.
- To always check the home before entering. Look for such things as open, ajar, or broken doors and windows, or anything that doesn't look right. Go to a designated safe place to call for help if something doesn't seem right.
- To always lock the door after entering and make sure the house is secure.
- To immediately check in with you upon returning home to let you know he or she has arrived safely.
- To tell callers you can't come to the telephone. Offer to take a message instead of letting people know he or she is home alone.
- Not to open the door or talk to anyone who comes to the home unless the person is a trusted family friend or relative. He/she must feel comfortable being alone with that person **and** the visit has been pre-approved by you.
- To stay alert for true emergencies such as a fire or gas-main leak that would require the need to leave the home.
- To check with you or another trusted adult if he or she is unsure about anything.

As a parent or guardian, you should make sure you have...

- A daily schedule of homework, chores, and activities for your child to follow.
- A list near the phone including numbers for you, law enforcement, the fire department, an ambulance service, your doctor, a poison-control center, and a trusted adult who's available in case of an emergency.
- What to do in case of fire; and how to get out of the house if there is a fire.
- A plan if you are late coming home. What to do if your child's plans change.
- Instructions for TV or computer use, talking on the phone, or inviting friends over when you aren't home.
- Time to talk about the day's events with your child. Make sure he or she knows it is okay to discuss anything with you, especially something that may have made him or her feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused.