

School Holiday Parent Kit

HOME ALONE

“At what age can my children be left at home by themselves?” is a common question asked by many parents. Given that there is no clear direction in the law you need to use your own judgment, taking into account your own family circumstances and the age and maturity of your children. Parents are expected to make ‘reasonable’ decisions about their children’s safety.

WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?

There is no actual law that states at what age children can 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 obligation for parents to make sure that children are properly looked after.

TIP

Do not assume that your child knows the rules. Ask them to tell you what they are.

- Parents are expected to provide food, clothing, a place to live, safety and supervision (*Family Law Act 1975*).
- NSW Police or the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) can remove children from situations where their safety is in serious danger and there is no guardian present (*Children and Young Persons (Care & Protection) Act 1998*).
- Parents can be charged with an offence if children are left in a dangerous situation, are not fed, clothed or provided with accommodation (*Children and Young Persons (Care & Protection) Act 1998*).

SHOULD YOU LEAVE OLDER CHILDREN IN CHARGE?

When a child or young 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. A parent may be held responsible for the carer as well as their own children if something goes wrong. For these reasons it is better if carers are adults.

A person who is still legally a child would not be judged against the standards of responsibility expected of adults.

If you do 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?”

If your children are left alone without a carer they must be old enough to take action in an emergency, know what to do and where to get help.

HOW SAFE IS YOUR HOME?

Accidents can happen very quickly, so parents always need 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 home.

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. 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 or using the toaster may seem simple tasks when you are there but may not be allowed when you’re away.

HOW LONG WILL YOU 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 alone and most importantly, how capable they are.

Babies and toddlers have a different sense of time from adults. An hour is not long for an adult but to your toddler it is endless and even this short absence could cause distress.

Babies or toddlers should not be left at home alone under any circumstances.



Human Services
Community Services

WHO WILL BE IN CHARGE?

It is not fair to expect an older child to take on the full weight or responsibility required to care for younger children. Their lack of experience may make it difficult for them to find ways of trying to control the others. They may be harsh and might use very different methods from what you use. If you have no choice, it is important that the child left in charge is capable and responsible and that the other children feel safe. This child 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 care for others.

TIP

Letting go of the reins gradually might mean giving your child a chance to practise being by themselves and to make mistakes.

ARE YOU SURE THAT YOUR CHILDREN KNOW....?

- **Where you're going and when you'll be back?**
- **How to get in contact with you?**
- **How to use the telephone?**
- **Where emergency numbers are listed (put next to the phone)?**
- **Their own telephone number and home address (police or fire brigade will need to know where to go)?**
- **The telephone numbers of trusted friends, neighbours or relatives?**
- **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 another child is unwell and help is needed?**
- **How to contact the doctor, hospital, police or fire brigade in an emergency (eg how to use 000 number)?**
- **How many friends are allowed to be at your place while you are out?**
- **Can they play outside?**
- **Can they use the swimming pool?**
- **Can they go to the shop or visit a neighbour?**
- **What is the special family password that they can say if I phone and they need help, or a code to use if I phone to check on them? For example, 3 rings, hang up and ring again before they pick up the phone.**

WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT

There comes a time when your teenagers start pleading with you to let them stay home alone without someone to look after them. This is a normal part of adolescence when young people are trying to feel more adult and independent.

Once again, the age and maturity of your child will make a difference. For example, you may feel very confident with a 13 year old who is very responsible but quite worried about a 16 year old who may try to take risks.

REMEMBER

If your children are left alone without a carer they must be old enough to take action in an emergency and know what to do and where to get help.

Adapted from 'Home Alone', Parenting magazine 6-12 years. NSW Department of Community Services. 1999.

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