



CHILDREN HOME ALONE

Advice for Parents on Risk and Difficult Decisions



Your guide to keeping your child safe



Introduction

There is no legally set age at which it is acceptable to leave your child at home alone. It depends on whether your child is mature enough to cope in an emergency and feels happy about being left alone. Children mature at different ages and every child is an individual.

You should never leave young children unattended, even for short periods of time and it is advised not to leave children at home alone. The Police will investigate and legal action may be taken if anything goes wrong in your absence, or if a child is injured or harmed as a result of being left alone.

- **Always leave your child in the care of a trusted adult**
- **You should always take steps to satisfy yourself that anyone else who may be looking after your child is responsible and trustworthy.**
- **Never leave your child with a stranger.**

Your children rely on you to protect them and you are responsible for making sure that they are happy and well looked after in your absence.

- How can you tell if your child is mature enough?
- Is it ever safe to leave your young child alone?
- What are the dangers and risks of leaving your child at home alone?

In this leaflet you will find the advice from professionals to help you decide whether to leave your child at home alone and what you need to do if you are not there.

Did you know?

There's no legal age limit for leaving a child on their own, but it is an offence to do so if it places them at risk. Parents can be prosecuted for neglect if they leave a child unsupervised "in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to health"

What is neglect?

If you fail to meet your child's basic needs, such as food and warm clothing, or constantly leave your child alone, this is known as neglect. Neglect is as serious as other forms of child abuse because the effects can be just as damaging and long-lasting.



REMEMBER

Never leave your baby or young child home alone, not even for a few minutes, regardless of whether they are sleeping or awake. The risks and dangers are too great.

If your child is under the age of 11, they may not be mature enough to cope with an emergency. They should not be left alone for more than a very short time. And remember to put all obvious dangers out of reach before you go, such as medicines, matches and sharp objects.

Even when leaving older children alone, make sure that they are happy about the arrangement and that they know how to contact the emergency services. Keep your mobile phone with you and make sure they know your number so they can call you if you're needed.

If your child is under the age of 16 they shouldn't be left alone overnight.

Teach your child to do if there's ever a problem.

Leave a list of people you trust that they could go to or could telephone, such as a neighbour or close relative.

Find out where to access support in your local area
The Scottish Families website www.scottishfamilies.gov.uk
provides free impartial information for families such as:

- Childcare availability in your area including: nurseries, childminders, playgroups and out of school care
- Early learning and childcare places for three and four year olds
- How different types of childcare are organised and what to look for when choosing a service
- Organisations offering support, information and guidance at local and national levels
- Local activities, events and initiatives

How to choose a baby sitter

Childminders should be registered.

All childminders should be registered with the appropriate body in Scotland this is the Scottish Childminder Association www.childminding.org.uk

Check the potential babysitter's age.

Parents should always choose someone over 16 to babysit children. If you use a younger sitter and harm comes to your child, you may be held responsible. And remember that even a 16-year-old may not be mature enough to be left home alone.

Follow your instincts.


If you have any doubts about a childminder, babysitter or other carer, do not leave your children with them. Always ask for at least two references and check these carefully.

Talk to your child.

If your child seems to be unhappy about a particular babysitter, find someone else.

Here are some things you should ask potential babysitters:

- What experience do you have of looking after children?
- Do you have any first-aid skills?
- What do you enjoy most about looking after children?
- What do you think is unacceptable behaviour?
- How would you deal with unacceptable behaviour?
- What would you do in an emergency?



It's actually quite helpful to have grandparents, your partner, friends, or a trusted babysitter taking care of your baby for a short while, in those early months, just so they get used to the idea that other people can also look after them.

Dilemmas for Parents

Problems sleeping

Parents with a young baby with a poor sleep pattern may be tempted to leave their baby sleeping in their cot when popping out to the shops for 15 minutes.

It is never alright to leave a small baby alone in the house, not even for a few minutes. What if the baby wakes up when the parent leaves? For a baby, 15 minutes is a long time to feel abandoned and left alone to cry. The risks are dangerous too what if parents are delayed or the baby becomes sick?"

Long hours

Some parents may have very demanding jobs and really have to put in the hours. The children have a key to let themselves in after school and they look after themselves for a few hours. Parents may make sure the children have emergency numbers if they need them, and teach them to never answer the door to strangers



Most children aged between nine to twelve years are not mature enough to be left on their own for more than a very short while and certainly not every day. Before you decide, make sure that your children feel happy and confident about being left alone and they know where you are and what to do in an emergency."

Social life

Many parents are single parents bringing up their children on their own. There is a temptation to go out at night when the children are in bed sleeping for a few hours to socialise with friends

It is never safe to leave your young children home alone at night, even if they are asleep. What if they suddenly woke from a bad dream and came looking for their parents As a single parent, finding time for yourself may be difficult. Why not try to find another parent in your area and arrange to take turns to babysit.

Being a parent is not easy

For further advice and information contact the Argyll and Bute Child Protection Committee Website www.argyll-bute.gov.uk

Or visit the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents in the home and outdoors website www.rosipa.com

More Information is available from the NSPCC website www.nspcc.org.uk