

NEWSRELEASE -- LIVING SMART

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WHEN IS YOUR CHILD OLD ENOUGH TO STAY HOME ALONE?

With school out for the summer, many parents may be wondering if their children are old enough to stay home alone. In making this decision, parents should consider both the maturity level of the child and the conditions under which the child will be left alone.

There is no specific age at which children are old enough to be home alone. Generally, however, it is between 10 and 12 years of age.

Ask these questions when considering your child's readiness to be home alone:

- Is my child mature enough to handle a potentially dangerous situation? What would my child do if there were a fire, a power outage, or a stranger at the door?
- Is my child mature enough to handle responsibility? Can my child be trusted not to lose the house key? Can my child do chores without supervision?
- Does my child want to stay home alone? Would my child be afraid in this situation? If brothers and sisters will be home too, will they all get along with each other or fight?
- Is my child resourceful? Can my child find something constructive, safe, and helpful to do if he or she is bored?
- Is the amount of time my child will be alone reasonable? If my child needed help quickly, are there people nearby who could help?

The following tips can help children make the transition to being home alone:

- Be dependable. If you tell your child you'll be home by 6 p.m., don't be late. If you will be late, call home; otherwise your child may be afraid that you have been hurt.
- Let your child know how to reach you in case of an emergency. Name a back-up

person for them to call if they can't reach you. Let them know who to call if they just need to talk to someone or get a suggestion for what to do.

- Set rules for your child's time at home before you try it out. Should your child answer the phone or the door? Are friends allowed to come over? Do you expect certain chores to be done? Be flexible enough to add and change rules if necessary.
- Keep communication open. Communication is key to self-care that works. It's also the key to successful family relationships.

Children also need to learn basic health, safety, and problem-solving skills before they are ready to supervise themselves.

Teach your children what foods provide healthy and nutritious meals and snacks. Let them help in preparing them. Also, teach food safety skills. Stress the importance of clean hands, surfaces, and utensils. Show them how to clean up and where foods should be stored when they are through. Children also need to know what equipment they are allowed to use and how to use them safely.

Explain basic first-aid techniques. Children should be able to recognize an emergency and know whom to call. In some cases, children can handle the situation themselves. Applying an antiseptic and bandage to a small cut is a simple task. In other cases, they may need to call a parent or an adult for help. They also need to recognize when to call "911".

Help your children learn problem-solving skills so they can deal with situations that arise. They need to learn how to make a good decision and to be responsible for their actions and choices. Build decision-making into family activities. Play board games that require problem solving and decision-making.

Talk to your children about situations that could happen. For example, how would they deal with a stranger at the door? What would they do if they heard a noise outside and saw someone breaking into the house next door? Discuss the many possible responses to these questions and help your children decide what would work best in different situations.

The decision to let a child remain home without supervision involves not only an evaluation of the child, but a training period so the child has the skills to be safe.