

Safety Tips for Children Staying Home Alone

Providing your children with this knowledge gives them confidence in their abilities and will help them deal with any emergencies that may arise.

Present your children with a number of situations and have them act out their responses. For example, pretend you are a stranger at the door asking to use the phone. Giving many examples and having your children actually respond to the situation will help them respond quickly and flexibly if the situation actually occurs when they are alone.

Children who stay alone need to know how to react in situations such as:

- being locked out
- being afraid
- being bored
- being lonely
- arguments with brothers and sisters

House rules about:

- leaving the house
- having friends in
- cooking and use of kitchen equipment
- appropriate snacks and meals
- talking with friends on the phone
- duties to be completed while home alone

Children who stay alone need to have:

Good telephone skills:

- a list of emergency numbers
- knowledge of what to say in an emergency situation
- how to respond if someone calls
- understanding of appropriate and inappropriate reasons for calling parents or other adults for help

Good personal safety skills:

- how to answer the door when alone
- how to lock and unlock windows
- what to do if approached by a stranger on the way home
- what to do if they think someone is in the house when they get home
- what to do if someone touches them inappropriately

Good home safety skills:

- kitchen safety (use of appliances, knives and tools)
- what to do if they smell smoke or gas, or in the event of a fire
- what to do during severe storms
- basic first aid techniques and how to know when to get help

When is it legal to leave children alone?

When thinking about leaving children alone, whether for a short or long time, it is important for parents to consider all the risks involved. There are many potential risks to children that need to be considered. It is also important to understand that parents and other persons responsible for a child's welfare also face risks.

Parents are legally responsible for their children's welfare until they reach adulthood. Part of caring for children is providing adequate supervision. Under some circumstances a parent can be charged with neglect for leaving children unattended.

What is lack of supervision?

Illinois law defines a neglected minor, in part, as "any minor under the age of 14 years whose parent or other person responsible for the minor's welfare leaves the minor without supervision for an unreasonable period of time without regard for the mental or physical health, safety or welfare of that minor."

How long may a child be left alone?

While recognizing that many factors may apply, Illinois law lists 15 specific factors to be considered when deciding whether a child has been left alone for an unreasonable period of time. They include:

1. the age of the child
2. the number of children left at the location
3. special needs of the child, including whether the child is physically or mentally handicapped, or otherwise in need of ongoing prescribed medical treatment such as periodic dosages of insulin or other medications
4. the duration of time in which the child was left without supervision
5. the condition and location of the place where the child was left without supervision
6. the time of day or night when the child was left without supervision
7. the weather conditions, including whether the child was left in a location with adequate protection from the natural elements such as adequate heat or light
8. the location of the parent or guardian at the time the child was left without supervision, the physical distance the child was from the parent or guardian at the time the child was without supervision
9. whether the child's movement was restricted, or the child was otherwise locked within a room or other structure
10. whether the child was given a phone number of a person or location to call in the event of an emergency and whether the child was capable of making an emergency call
11. whether there was food and other provision left for the child

12. whether any of the conduct is attributable to economic hardship or illness and the parent, guardian or other person having physical custody or control of the child made a good faith effort to provide for the health and safety of the child
13. the age and physical and mental capabilities of the person(s) who provided supervision for the child
14. whether the child was left under the supervision of another person
15. any other factor that would endanger the health and safety of that particular child

Resources:

https://www2.illinois.gov/dcfs/safekids/safety/Documents/prepar_Kids.pdf

(Spanish) https://www2.illinois.gov/dcfs/safekids/safety/Documents/prepar_KidsSP.pdf