

Home alone

It's not easy to decide the right time or age to leave children at home on their own. There is no actual law stating the age children can be left at home alone. However the law is clear that parents are responsible for their children's safety and they should not be left in situations where they could be harmed.

There are many things to think about when deciding whether your children should be left at home without you, such as safety, your children's ages, how mature and capable they are, and whether they could cope in an emergency.

It's important to have rules and that your children understand them.

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What does the law say?

There is no law stating an age at which children can or cannot 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 older children to care for brothers and sisters. While different societies have different customs, in Australia there is a legal duty for parents to make sure their children are properly looked after.

Parents are expected to provide food, clothing, a place to live, safety and supervision (*Family Law Act 1975*).

- Parents can be charged with an offence if children are left unattended and in a situation which endangers their life or health (*Crimes Act 1900*).
- The Police or Department for Child Protection can remove children from situations where their safety is in serious danger and there is no guardian present (*Children and Young People Act 2008*).



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Can parents leave older children in charge?

When a person under 18 years — an older brother, sister or teenage friend — cares for children, the question of negligence or liability could arise. As a parent you may be held responsible for the carer, as well as your own children if something goes wrong. For these reasons it is better that carers are adults (over the age of 18 years). A carer who is still legally a child (under 18 years) would not be judged against the standards of responsibility expected of adults.

If you decide to leave your children in the care of an older brother or sister or other young person, you must be sure they are reliable. Ask yourself, “Are they mature enough to take responsibility for keeping my child safe?”, “Could they cope with an emergency such as a fire, an accident or a break-in?”.

If your child is 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.

When you think about all the things a child left at home needs to know and be able to do, the responsibility is enormous. Think carefully about expecting your child to handle these situations — is it reasonable?

Questions to ask yourself

How safe is your home?

Accidents happen quickly and most parents know how easily a child can fall into a pool, pull saucepans off the stove, swallow objects or play with matches. Parents always have to be 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 there.

Are the 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 you may decide not to allow them when you’re away. If your children are home alone will your rules change for making or answering phone calls, using mobile phones or using the internet?

Do not assume your children know the rules. Ask them to tell you what they are and show you what they would do.



How long will I 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 and most importantly how capable they are.

What about babies and toddlers?

Babies and toddlers should never be left at home alone.

Babies, toddlers and young children have a different sense of time from adults. An hour is not long for an adult but to your young child it is endless and even this short absence could cause distress. It is also unsafe. What would happen if you left your sleeping baby at home while you picked up your toddler from kindergarten and you had an accident?

It is never OK to leave babies and toddlers home alone, even for a short time.

Who will be in charge?

It is not fair to expect a child to take on the full responsibility of caring for younger children. Their lack of

experience may make it difficult for them to take charge of situations and things can get out of hand. It can be especially challenging if any children are unwell, have difficult behaviours or a disability which requires extra care and consideration.

The child in charge should be able to handle any disagreements or fights and know what to do if the other children don't follow the rules or are ill. The oldest child is not always the most capable to care for other children.

Any child left in charge must be capable and responsible and the other children must feel safe in their care.

Am I sure that my child knows:

- where I will be and when I'll be back
- how to use the home or mobile phone to contact me, neighbours, friends, family or emergency services on 000
- their own phone number and home address — emergency services will need to know where to go
- where to find the first aid kit and how to use it
- how to use keys in deadlocks and how to unbolt them

- what to do in case of fire. Do you have smoke alarms, a fire extinguisher and a fire blanket?
- what to do if someone knocks on the door. Are they allowed to go to the door? If so, what can they say?
- whether or not they should make or answer phone calls, make or reply to texts or use social media sites
- how to judge if a child is unwell and needs help
- what children are allowed/not allowed to do (family rules in a parent's absence)
- if friends are allowed over (let their parents know you are not there)
- if they can play outside
- if they can use the swimming pool, if you have one
- if they can go to the shop or visit a neighbour
- the rules about the family pets.

If you are going out, make sure the person in charge is able to handle any emergency and knows where to get help.

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When the time is right

There comes a time when children and young people plead with you to let them stay home alone without someone to look after them. This is a normal part of growing up when young people are trying to feel more adult and independent. Once again, the age and maturity of your children will make a difference. You may feel very confident with a 13-year-old who is very responsible, but worry about a 16-year-old who may take risks. Letting go of the reins slowly might mean giving your children chances to practise being by themselves for short periods and gain their sense of independence and your confidence.

- If leaving them with a mobile phone, ask them to call or text you to make sure they can use it.
- Phone regularly to check on your children.
- Return home when you said you would.

The section 'Questions to ask yourself' still applies to all children and young people.

What about leaving children in cars?

Leaving your child in a car unsupervised at any time is extremely dangerous and not recommended.

- In summer the heat in a car is much hotter than outside and children can quickly suffer heat exhaustion and become very ill.
- Children can get bored and explore the car's knobs and buttons which can lead to dangers.
- Children can become distressed or may try to struggle free from their seatbelts and become injured.
- They may be in danger of someone trying to steal the car with them in it, or be taken from the car by someone.

Children should never be left alone in cars.

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, a partnership between the Department of Education and Child Development and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

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Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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