

Home alone

Your guide to keeping
your child safe



Advice for parents on
risks and difficult decisions

NSPCC 
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.



As a parent, caring for your child is your number one priority. But sometimes you might have to spend time away from your child, whether it's to go to work, go out for the evening or just to nip out to the shops.

There's no legally set age at which it's OK to leave your child at home alone. It depends on whether yours 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.

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.

So 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 yours at home alone?

We've collected the best advice from professionals, as well as some top tips from parents, to help you decide whether to leave your child at home alone and what you need to do if you're not there.



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 about 12,** 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 about what 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.

For more of our positive parenting advice, visit www.yourfamily.org.uk



Did you know?

There's no legal age limit for leaving a child on their own, but it's 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". (Children and Young Persons Act*)

*Children and Young Persons Act 1933 [England and Wales], Children and Young Persons (Scotland) Act 1937 and Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1968

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.

Find out more

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA)
Provides information and leaflets for parents on safety in the home.

www.rospace.com
0121 248 2000
help@rospace.com

What's your verdict?



Top NSPCC parenting advisor Eileen Hayes responds with advice for three parents talking about leaving their children home alone.

Problems sleeping

"It's hard for me to get my baby girl to sleep. She nodded off just as I was leaving to pick up my son from nursery, and I couldn't face waking her up. I didn't think that she could come to any harm in just 15 minutes, so I left her at home alone while I collected my son." **Sophie, mum of Ben, 3, and Izzy, 7 months**

Eileen "It is never OK to leave your baby alone in the house, not even for a few minutes. What if she had woken up just after you left? For a baby, 15 minutes is a long time to feel abandoned and left alone to cry. The risks are dangerous too – what if you were delayed or your baby was sick?"



Find out more

Daycare Trust

Provides information on childcare options for parents.

www.daycaretrust.org.uk
020 7840 3350

One Parent Families/Gingerbread
(includes One Parent Families Scotland)

www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk
0800 018 5026
info@oneparentfamilies.org.uk



Long hours

"We both 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. We make sure they have emergency numbers if they need them, and we teach them to never answer the door to strangers." **Scott, dad of James, 11, and Josh, 9**

Eileen "Most nine to 12-year-olds 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

"I'm bringing up my two young boys on my own. The only way I can ever have an evening out is if I go when they're asleep at night. I'm only gone for a couple of hours and they never wake up anyway, so there's no harm in it." **John, dad of Billy, 6 and Paul, 2**

Eileen "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 you? As a single parent, finding time for you may be difficult. Why not try to find another parent in your area and arrange to take turns to babysit?"

Remember it's never worth putting your child's safety or emotional wellbeing at risk.

How to choose a babysitter or childminder

- **Childminders should be registered.** All childminders should be registered with the appropriate body in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- **Check the potential babysitter's age.** Although there are no laws about the age of babysitters, you should try to choose someone over 16. 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.
- **Follow your instincts.** If you have any doubts about a childminder, babysitter or other carer, don't take them on. 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?



Find out more

For a list of registered childminders:

ChildcareLink
www.childcarelink.org.uk
0800 234 6346

National Childminding Association
www.ncma.org.uk
0800 169 4486

Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA)
www.nicma.org
0871 200 2063

Scottish Childcare
www.scottishchildcare.gov.uk

"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." **Eileen Hayes**

Keep your child safe online

The internet is a great resource for learning and fun, but it's important to make sure your child is surfing safely at all times, particularly if they are home alone.

- You can buy filtering software or download it free from the internet – see www.getnetwise.org for more information.
- Attachments and web links on emails can contain viruses and may expose children to inappropriate material. Teach children to only open attachments or click on links from people they know.
- Explain to children that it's not safe to reveal personal information, such as their name, address or phone number on the internet. Encourage them to use a cool nickname rather than their own name.



Find out more

www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents
Provides good advice on internet and mobile phone safety.

"Encourage your child to talk about what they've been doing on the internet. Make sure they feel able to speak to you if they ever feel uncomfortable, upset or threatened by anything they see online." **Chris Cloke, NSPCC head of child protection awareness and diversity**

NSPCC Helpline

Don't talk yourself out of it. Talk to us.

The NSPCC Helpline

If you're finding it hard to cope as a parent and want to talk, or you're worried about a child who is at risk of abuse or in need of help, the NSPCC Helpline is here to help 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Call **0808 800 5000** to speak to a helpline advisor. For help by email help@nspcc.org.uk

If you are hard of hearing, you can contact us Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm by:

- textphone **0808 056 0566**
- British Sign Language interpreters on videophone **020 8463 1148**
- British Sign Language interpreters on IP videophone or webcam – nspcc.signvideo.tv



In association with

Your family



More advice from the NSPCC and Your family

Our parenting pack

If you've found this leaflet useful, you might like to try some of the other titles in our parenting pack. They include plenty of advice on practical, positive parenting, and cover subjects like managing stress, listening to children and keeping your child safe when they're out alone.

To request a pack, please send an A4 SAE (with £2 in stamps), mentioning the parenting pack, to the address below or download copies from

www.nspcc.org.uk/parenting



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www.nspcc.org.uk
020 7825 2500
info@nspcc.org.uk

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