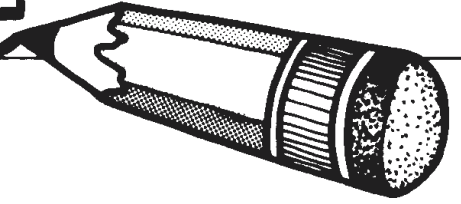


Parenting Pipeline

A newsletter for parents of fourth-grade children
from Iowa State University Extension



that give you an indication your child may be ready to stay at home alone. Readiness signs may include:

- being agreeable to stay home alone
- not being easily frightened
- showing signs of accepting responsibility
- being aware of the needs of others
- being able to consider alternatives
- being able to make decisions independently
- being able to use unstructured time wisely
- being ready on time for school
- completing homework and household chores without excessive prodding
- letting you know where he is going and when he will return.

Self-Care: Is It OK For Your Child?

Is Your Child Ready To Stay Alone?

Knowing if a child is ready to spend time alone at home isn't always easy. Children vary in maturity, and there are other important factors, such as the location of your home, that may have an influence on your decision. The age of your child alone is not enough information to determine this.

There is no magic age at which a child is ready to stay alone at home, although readiness signs often appear between the ages of 10 and 12. Look for signs

Location of Your Home Makes a Difference

You may feel your child is ready to stay home alone, but there are other important considerations including these:

- Do you live in a remote area without close neighbors?
- Do you consider your neighborhood relatively safe?
- Is it possible for your child to reach you or another responsible adult to check in at agreed times or to report an emergency?
- How long will your child be alone?
- Will your child have limited opportunities to socialize with other children or take part in after-school or community-sponsored activities because he is isolated at home?

After considering some of these situations, you may decide your child should not stay alone even if he shows signs of readiness.

Families are Different

Will your child be left at home with siblings? There can be positive things about siblings being at home together, but there is also the possibility of physical or psychological abuse among siblings. There may be concerns when an older sibling assumes more than a fair share of responsibility for younger siblings.

The circumstances in each family are different. The decision to be for or against self-care won't be the same in every family. What appears to work successfully in another family may not work for yours.

Once you have made a decision that seems best for you and your family, try it for a few weeks. Monitor your situation and be flexible enough to make changes if needed.

Preparing Your Child for Self-Care

If you choose self-care, preparing your child and yourself can make it a safe experience. Children who stay alone at home may need to react to a number of emergencies such as:

- being locked out of the house
- unwelcome strangers at the door or on the telephone
- a fire
- a storm
- a home accident
- arguments with siblings
- an animal bite or bee sting
- a child becoming ill.

It is important to teach children telephone skills, personal safety skills and home safety skills so they are better prepared to handle possible emergency situations. It is also important that your family decide on house rules to serve as a guide when you are not home. House rules about the following may be helpful:

- leaving the house or yard
- inviting friends in
- telephone limitations and privileges
- homework
- household tasks
- television viewing — choice of programs and limit on viewing time
- snack foods — kind and number allowed
- kitchen — use of appliances and clean-up responsibilities after snacking

- off limits — access to power tools, firearms, your personal items
- other matters important to your family.

It's usually best to work with your child over an extended time on self-care guidelines. Too much information at one time may be overwhelming. Information is usually remembered better if situations are acted out. An actual fire drill, an acted-out telephone conversation, a response to a pretend storm or to a pretend stranger at the door may be good teaching devices. Programs and home study materials are available in some communities to help parents work out a self-care plan. Check with ISU Extension Service county office, school, church or county social services office to see if such information is available.

Giving Self-Care a Try

Once you have worked with your child and feel quite confident that she is prepared with adequate knowledge and skills to stay alone, you may want to set up a trial period. If your child knows it is a testing period, making needed changes may be easier. During the trial period, make a special effort to talk frequently with your child about her feelings, discuss house rules and review safety skills. If you feel comfortable with your arrangement, proceed with confidence but be flexible in making changes as needed. Keep communication lines open with your child. Feelings about being home alone, house rules and safety skills are important to discuss even through the teen years.

Adapted for use in Iowa from Parenting Pipeline, North Dakota State University Extension Service, by Donna K. Donald, family life field specialist, Iowa State University Extension.

This newsletter is published for families with fourth-grade children by Iowa State University Extension. For more information about parenting education, contact your local county extension office or access the Iowa State University Extension to Families website, www.extension.iastate.edu/families.

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