Lyon County · O'Brien County · Osceola County · Sioux County

CLIPPINGS

A Weekly Column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

---

Week of April 24, 2017

For Immediate Release

Determining When a Child is Ready to Stay Home Alone

Lori Hayungs, Human Sciences Specialist, Family Life

With the school year coming to a close and summer just around the corner, many parents of school-agers are faced with the decision of finding child care for their adolescent or allowing their child to stay home alone.

Parents often call, wanting the 'magic number' - the age that their child should be in order to stay home without supervision.

Parents have many things to consider when making the decision, including the child's ability to make good decisions, how he or she feels about being home alone and the length of time the child will be alone.

Has your child spent some smaller increment times at home alone? This would be a good first step in gauging your child's comfort and skill level. However, that is not the only factor to consider. The neighborhood you live in and the availability of adults should also be given some thought as well as your flexibility to field phone calls or check-in occasionally with your child.

Ask questions to assess readiness

Science of Parenting (https://blogs.extension.iastate.edu/scienceofparenting/) is an Iowa State University Extension and Outreach blog that shares research-based information with parents. The blog lists the following questions that parents can ask themselves to determine their child's readiness to stay home alone.

1. Is my child mature enough to handle the responsibilities of being on his or her own?
2. Do my child and I communicate well about feelings?
3. Can my child manage simple tasks like making a snack and taking a phone message?
4. Has my child indicated an interest and/or a willingness to stay home alone?
5. Does my child generally observe rules that exist in our home?
6. Does my child spontaneously tell me about daily events?
7. Is my child physically able to unlock and lock the doors at our home?
8. Can my child solve small problems without assistance?
9. Does my child know when and how to seek outside help?
10. Do I think my child is prepared to handle an accident or an emergency?
11. Will my child follow our household rules when I am not home?

Teach skills before leaving a child home alone

Teach your child important skills as well as any household rules you want to make clear before leaving your child home alone. This will give your child confidence in his or her ability and help your child deal with emergencies.

Talk about expectations for answering the door, responding to phone calls, rules about having friends over, options for meals and snacks, what to do in a storm, and who to contact with questions. Making a chart with guidelines and emergency numbers can help make those expectations clear.

Role play some of the various situations the child might encounter without adult supervision. This will give the child a chance to practice his or her responses and will help parents determine if child care or other summer school-age programming might be a better option.

Don't see staying home alone as an "all or nothing" option. Parents can be creative. Perhaps attending a program two to three days a week or spending a day or two with a grandparent are a possibility. This will help keep a child from being bored and may even help a child to better enjoy days spent home alone.

Do what is best for the child and family

It is natural for parents and youth to give thought to what others are doing. But every child and situation is unique. The best decision is made when considering what is right for your child and family.

Be sure to periodically review house rules and safety information with the child. Children who are emotionally ready and have the knowledge and skills for handling emergencies can gain independence and confidence when given the opportunity to care for themselves.

- 30 -

Lori Hayungs, Human Sciences Specialist, Family Life
Iowa State University Extension and Outreach
712-737-4230 or lhayungs@iastate.edu