

# Be sure child is ready to stay home alone

## How can you tell when your child is old enough to stay home alone, if only for a few hours?

Whether for a few minutes or a few hours, all parents face this dilemma at some point. If you look at Ohio's state or local laws, you won't find a minimum age specified. Instead, the Ohio Revised Code simply states that parents are responsible for providing proper care and supervision for their children. So, the real question isn't one of age, but of your child's maturity and readiness. Examine this in light of three broad areas: physical; intellectual; and social/emotional:

- Physical: Can your child lock and unlock the doors and windows, use the telephone, and operate appliances, such as a microwave, toaster oven and stove top? Children need to be reasonably self-sufficient in your absence to stay home alone.

- Intellectual: Your child must be able to read and take a written message; follow and give directions; and understand and describe house rules and safety/emergency procedures. Talk with your child about a situation in the past when he or she had to figure out the right thing to do without adult input -- basic problem-solving and decision-making skills are a must. Also, discuss in advance what to do in case of a power outage or tornado; how to take care of basic first aid in case of cuts and scrapes; and how to answer the phone and the door to make sure strangers aren't told the child is home alone.

- Social/emotional: Children who are about to stay home alone should already be in the habit of following household rules and telling you about daily events without prompting.



Take your cues from your child: Children who express interest in staying home alone and who feel confident in their ability to take care of themselves are likely ready; those who express feelings of fear, loneliness or uncertainty about staying home alone probably aren't.

If you believe your child is ready to stay home alone, be sure to create a plan first. Establish house rules. Can your child leave the house to play outdoors? Invite friends in? What activities are off limits?

Make a list of three emergency contacts and keep them by the phone, and, if your child has a cell phone, be sure they are input into the phone's contacts list. You may want to establish a code word you can use if you need to communicate with your child through another person.

Also, rehearse how your child should respond to potential safety or emergency situations, such as an injury, a kitchen fire, a burst water pipe or a stranger at the door.

It's also important to establish up front if your child needs to complete any household chores while home alone. Be sure you're on the same page on standards for their completion.

In addition, discuss food and snacks -- be sure there are plenty of tasty, nutritious options. Just as importantly, develop a list of activities (besides TV and video games), and stock a "crafts center" for creative things to do.

*Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or [filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu).*



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## For the month of June 2009

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**Dear Subscriber:** This column was reviewed by Kara Newby, program coordinator in Human Development and Family Science for Ohio State University Extension, and Carol Chandler, Extension educator in family and consumer sciences. Special thanks to Kirk Bloir; much of this information was taken from his May-June 2002 article in OSU Extension's *Positive Parenting* newsletter.

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