



Home is the place where a child should feel protected and safe. **But what about those times when a parent can't be there? If there is no affordable after-school program or sitter available, when is it okay for your child to be home alone?**

There is no right answer for every child. There is no magic age when a child suddenly becomes responsible and mature. But there are ways to evaluate your child's capabilities in order to make a more informed decision.



Things you might not know:

- Nearly 4.5 million children ages 14 and under are injured in the home every year.¹
- The vast majority of unintentional injury-related deaths among children occurs in the evening hours when children are most likely to be out of school and unsupervised.¹
- Children are most likely to be victims of violent crimes by non-family members between the hours of 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.²
- Violent juvenile crimes triple between the hours of 3:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.²



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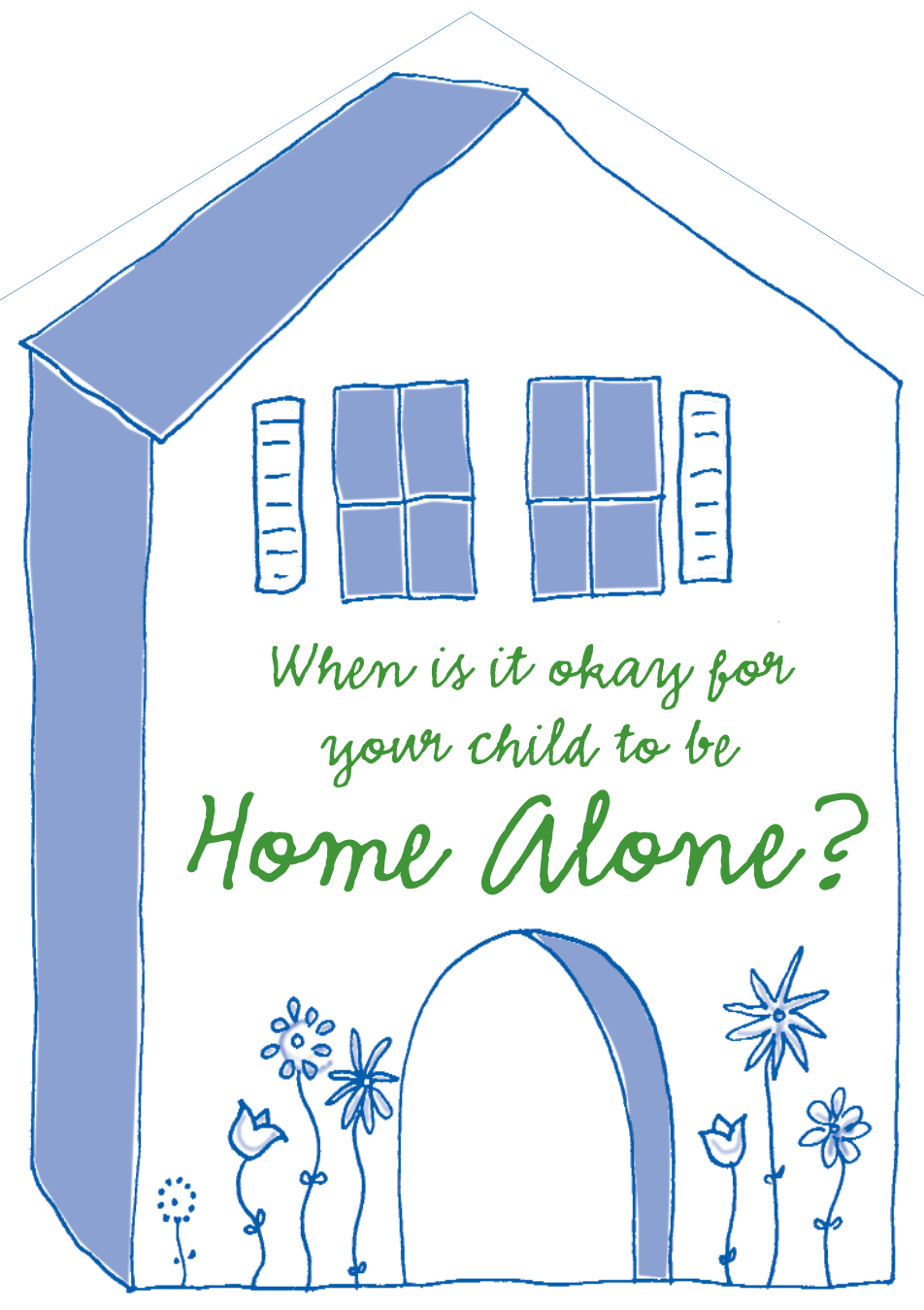
www.pcain.org

¹ From the National SAFE KIDS Campaign, www.safekids.org

² "Nurturing Today;" Family Development Resources; Summer 2000

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When is it okay for
your child to be
Home Alone?



Review these questions:

Is your child mature enough to be home alone? Age in years and age in maturity are very different things. A child who does not know how to respond to a knock at the door, or one who forgets to lock the door, is not ready to be left home alone.

Can your child handle fear, loneliness, and boredom? These are some of the things kids face when they are home by themselves.

Is there a responsible adult nearby—a relative or a neighbor—who your child can call for assistance? Even if you work nearby, there may be times when you will not be available. Who can your child turn to then?

Does your child know emergency procedures? Have you reviewed fire escape routes? Is there a first aid kit available, and does your child know how to use it? Role-play with your child—pretend there is an emergency and see your child's response.

Does your child perform everyday tasks such as fixing a snack, dialing the phone, and writing messages? These are necessary skills.

Does your child regularly solve small problems without assistance, knowing when it's okay to ask for help? If your child arrived home to find the front door open, or a window broken, what would be the result?

Are there siblings who will also be home? Does your child manage conflicts with/among siblings without adult help? The best way to answer this is to watch your child with siblings. If your child doesn't manage well when you're home, most likely the situation will not improve when you're away.

Is your child comfortable with the idea of staying alone? Ask! If the answer is no, then it is definitely not a good idea. A child must feel confident about being alone and self-sufficient for the time you are away.



If you—and your child—are confident that the time is right, try leaving your child for short periods of time to test the results. Call it an “experiment.” **First**, make sure that these elements are in place:

There should be a basic agreement—a contract of sorts—between you and your child about what is expected when you are away, with clear rules as to what is off-limits.

Make a thorough check of your home for safety risks—access to kitchen appliances (especially gas), alcoholic beverages, firearms. Remove the risks!

Make certain your child has every key necessary to get into the house, with a plan for what to do if the keys are lost.

All necessary information should be kept by every phone—your home address, emergency numbers, your contact info, neighbor’s phone number.

And, if possible, leave a cell phone number or pager number to reach you immediately.

Afterwards, discuss your experiment—did each person feel comfortable? If you still have concerns, contact a trusted professional or clergy person to help you address your concerns. Try the experiment again when everyone feels more comfortable and confident.

Safety Hints

Source: North American Missing Children Association; Latch Key Kids.

Before making the decision to leave your child alone, discuss these situations together. Be certain that everyone involved is comfortable and confident that **all** of these situations could be confronted successfully.

You're home alone and a stranger calls to speak to Mom or Dad. What do you say?

"Mom and Dad are very busy. May I have your number so they can call you when they are free?" NEVER tell anyone you are home alone.

A friend calls and asks you to come to her house, since her parents aren't home either. What should you do?

"Mom and I have a rule that I can't go anywhere without her permission. I'll be glad to play with you tomorrow at school." NEVER invite a friend to your house without your parent's permission.

Your younger brother is holding a can of some cleaning product. You aren't sure if he swallowed some. What do you do?

Call the poison control center. Mom or Dad should have the number by the phone. Follow their instructions exactly. Call your parents so they can come home quickly.

You are playing in the front yard and a stranger drives by slowly and tries to talk to you. What do you do?

Go into the house and lock the door. Look through the window. If the car does not leave, call 911 and tell the operator exactly what happened. Remember the color of the car and what the driver looked like. Try to remember the license plate number. NEVER talk to a stranger.

A friend comes over (because you already asked permission) and tells you there is something "really cool" to show you. When you see that the "cool" thing is a handgun, what do you do?

Ask your friend to put the gun down and together go to another room (take along anyone else who is in the house). There, call your parent to come home immediately. If you can't reach a parent, call 911 and explain the situation. Stay away from the gun and wait for help.

You smell smoke, or the smoke alarm sounds. What should you do?

Call 911 and get out of the house. Wait in the front yard or another safe place for the fire trucks. You and your parents should practice a plan of action until you know it very well.