

## home ALONE!

Parents at some stage are faced with the dilemma of having to leave their children on their own. “**At what age can my children be left at home by themselves?**” is a common question asked by many parents. Given that there is no clear direction in the law you need to use your own judgment taking into account your own family circumstances and the age and maturity of your children. Parents are expected to make ‘reasonable’ decisions about their children’s safety.

### What does the law say?

**There is no actual law that states at what age children can or cannot be left alone, but the law is clear about the responsibility of parents to look after their children.**

In many cultures it is usual for children to care for brothers and sisters. While different societies have different customs, in Australia there is a legal obligation for parents to make sure that children are properly looked after.

- Parents are expected to provide food, clothing, a place to live, safety and supervision (Family Law Act).
- The Police or the Department of Community Services can remove children from situations where their safety is in serious danger and there is no guardian present (Children [Care & Protection] Act 1987).
- Parents can be charged with an offence if children are left in a dangerous situation, are not fed, clothed or provided with accommodation (Children [Care & Protection] Act 1987).

### Questions to ask yourself

(If you’re thinking of leaving your child at home)

#### Can parents leave older children in charge?

When a child or person under the age of 18 years (for example, an older brother, sister or teenage friend) care for children, the question of negligence or liability could arise. As a parent you may be held responsible for the carer as well as your own child if something goes wrong. For these reasons it is better that carers should be adults. A person who is still legally a child would not be judged against the standards of responsibility expected of adults.

If you do leave your child in the care of an older brother or sister or other young person, you must be sure that they are reliable and mature. Ask yourself: “Could this child cope with an emergency?” for example, a fire, an accident or a break-in.

If your child is left alone without a carer they must be old enough to take action in an emergency and know what to do and where to get help.

#### How safe is our home?

Accidents happen so quickly and most parents know how easily a child can fall into a pool, pull saucepans off the stove, swallow objects or play with matches. Parents always have to be on the alert, especially with young children. **There is an even greater need to check that dangerous things are out of reach if you’re not going to be there.**

#### Are the ground rules clear?

Every family has its own ground rules. It is important to be clear about what children can and cannot do and these rules may be different when you are not there or when someone else is minding your child. For example, making a hot drink, turning on the heater, running the bath, using the toaster may seem simple tasks when you are there but may not be allowed when you’re away. **It is not advisable to leave babies or toddlers alone under any circumstances.**

#### Who will be in charge?

It is not fair to expect an older child to take on the full weight or responsibility required to care for younger children. Their lack of experience may make it difficult for them to find ways of trying to control others. They may be harsh and might use very different methods from what you use. If you have no choice then it is important that the child left in charge is capable and responsible and that the other children feel safe. This child should be able to handle any disagreements or fights and know what to do if the other children ‘play up’, disobey the ground rules, or are ill. The oldest child is not necessarily the most capable to care.

A child with a disability requires additional care which may be too much for another child to handle.

## Am I sure that my child knows...?

- Where I'm going and when I'll be back.
- How to get in contact with me.
- How to use the telephone.
- Where emergency numbers are listed (put next to the phone).
- Their own telephone number and home address (police or fire will need to know where to go).
- The telephone numbers of trusted friends, neighbours or relatives.
- Where to find the first aid kit and how to use it.
- How to use deadlocks.
- What to do in case of fire.
- What to do if someone knocks on the door.
- Whether or not they should answer the phone if it rings.
- How to judge if another child is unwell and help is needed.
- How to contact the doctor, hospital, police or fire brigade in an emergency (e.g. how to use 000 number).
- Family rules:
  - How many friends are allowed?
  - Can they play outside?
  - Can they use the swimming pool?
  - Can they go to the shop or visit a neighbour?
  - What are the rules about the family pets?
  - What is the special family password that they can say if I phone and they need help, or a code to use if I phone to check on them. For example, 3 rings, hang up and ring again before they pick up the phone.

## When the time is right

There comes a time when your teenager will start pleading with you to let them stay home alone without someone to look after them. This is a normal part of adolescence when young people are trying to feel more adult and independent. Once again, the age and maturity of your child will make a difference. For example, you may feel very confident with a 13 year old who is very responsible and quite worried about a 16 year old who may try to take risks. Letting go of the reins gradually might mean giving your child a chance to practise being by themselves and to make mistakes.

## What about leaving children in cars?

Leaving your child in a car unsupervised at any time is extremely dangerous and not recommended. It may also be an offence, depending on the circumstances.

- In summer the temperature in a car is much hotter than outside and your child can quickly suffer heat exhaustion and become seriously ill.
- Children get bored and will explore the car's knobs and buttons which can lead to dangers.
- Children can become distressed or may try to struggle free from their seatbelts and become injured.
- Children may be in danger of someone trying to steal the car or they may be taken away by someone.

## REMINDERS

- Be sure that you have no other choice but to leave your child alone.
- Be very careful who cares for your child.
- Place someone in charge who is able to handle any emergency and knows where to get help.
- Check the safety of your home.
- Test your child on the ground rules.
- Check that each child feels safe.
- Phone regularly to check on your child.
- Return home when you said you would.

Source: [www.community.nsw.gov.au](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au)