

## CITY OF MADISON FIRE DEPARTMENT



# Kids Home Alone

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Each day after school, several million children come home alone and take care of themselves while their parents work. Many children also take care of themselves in the evening, on weekends or during school vacations - whenever a parent or other adult can't be home with them.

When the time is right, staying home alone can be a positive experience for children. A child may become more responsible and feel proud about staying home alone, if he or she is ready for it.

### Is your child ready to stay home alone?

There is no magic age when children develop the maturity and good sense they need to stay alone. Some children display these abilities around age 12, or even sooner; others do so when they're older. There are signs that show your child may be ready. For example, if your child can get ready for school on time, do homework with little assistance, and talk to you about his or her feelings, he or she may be ready to stay home alone.

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When assessing your child's readiness to stay home alone, you'll want to consider his or her maturity in four areas: physical, mental, social and emotional. The following checklist will help you evaluate your child's readiness. You may have to do some detective work to answer these questions. Try asking your child to open a window, fix a sandwich, take a message, and answer the door. Play "What if?" games to learn if your child could handle emergency situations safely. Ask, for example, what should be done if the smoke alarm sounds or if he or she gets a bad cut when home alone. Whenever possible, have your child act out his or her response. Sometimes children can give the right answer but can't do what is needed.

### Physical readiness - Is your child able to:

- Lock and unlock the doors and windows of your home? Yes/No
- Perform everyday tasks such as fixing a sandwich, dialing the telephone, and writing messages? Yes/ No

### Mental readiness - Does your child:

- Tell time? Yes/ No
- Understand what "stranger" and "emergency" mean? Yes/ No
- Recognize danger and know how to stay safe? Yes/ No
- Solve small problems on his or her own, but know when to get help? Yes/No
- Consider how his or her actions affect others? Yes/ No

### Social readiness - Does your child:

- Solve conflicts with brothers and sisters with little help from adults? Yes/ No
- Talk easily to you about what happens at school, and about his or her feelings? Yes/ No
- Feel confident enough to contact another adult if a problem arises? Yes/ No

### Emotional readiness - Does your child:

- Feel confident and secure when alone? Yes/ No
- Seem willing to stay alone? Yes/ No
- Know how to handle fear, loneliness and boredom? Yes/ No
- Know how to handle responsibility such as getting ready for school on time and looking out for younger brothers and sisters? Yes/ No

If you can answer "yes" to most of the questions in the checklist, your child is showing signs of the physical, mental, social, and emotional maturity needed to stay home alone. Your child needs to be capable in each of these four areas before he or she will be safe and secure.

### Other considerations - Even if your child seems mature enough to stay home alone, you'll need to think about some other factors:

- Is your home safe?



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- Is your neighborhood safe?
- How long will your child be alone each day?
- Is there an adult living or working nearby, where your child can go for help?
- Does your child have special medical, physical, or emotional needs?
- Is your family going through a difficult transition period due to a recent move, death, divorce or remarriage?

**There are certain times when leaving your child home alone is not a good idea.**

- It's never a good idea if your home or neighborhood is not safe.
- Many children do best when they're not home alone for more than an hour at a time. However, this varies for different children and different settings. For example, more mature children in a neighborhood with several adults nearby may be all right for somewhat longer periods. For younger children or children in less supportive settings, an hour may be too long. You will need to decide how much time alone is right for your situation, based on your child and setting.
- Children do best when they're not overburdened by caring for younger siblings. Children caring for siblings need to be even older and more mature than other children ready to stay home alone. The younger siblings need to be comfortable about staying home without an adult.
- Your child will need a special adult he or she can telephone when feeling frightened or lonely, or for help in an emergency. Your child will also need a safe place to go in case of a lost key or a fire.
- Your child should not stay home alone if he/she has special needs, or is adjusting to new family circumstances.

**Are you ready for your child to stay home alone? Your feelings as a parent also are important:**

- Do you feel comfortable about your child staying alone?
- Are you ready to give your child more independence and freedom?

If you're confident that your child will be safe and will make wise choices, you will feel better about leaving him/her home alone. If you believe he or she is willing and ready to stay alone, you'll be able to feel good about your child and about yourself as a parent.

**What's next?**

If both you and your child seem ready, and if other factors make staying home alone a good choice, you'll want to start preparing your child. You will need to teach him or her certain skills, and develop rules and schedules.

If you don't think your child is ready to stay home alone regularly, there are resources that can help you find quality after-school care. If you live in a Dane County community, contact your local school district, or Community Coordinated Child Care (4-C) at 271-9181. If you live in the City of Madison, contact your child's school, or the Office of Community Services at 267-4995.

Remember that assuring your child's readiness for staying home alone is an ongoing process. Be sure to talk regularly with your child to review how well staying home alone is working for both of you.

**Is your child ready to stay?**

Greater Madison Safe Community Coalition  
P.O. Box 566  
Madison, WI 53701  
Phone: (608) 256-6713  
CH2058-0700P

**Thanks to the following organizations for their help in planning this campaign:**

- Boys and Girls Clubs of Dane County
- Dane County Department of Human Services
- Dane County Public Health
- Dane County Youth Commission
- Madison Fire Department
- Madison Metropolitan School District
- Meriter Hospital
- University of Wisconsin Police
- University of Wisconsin Children's Hospital

Also thanks to the Brown County Health Department for sharing its Self Care for Kids program resources.

This is not a school-sponsored activity and your local school district does not approve, support or endorse this program/activity.

Written by [Laurie Lovedale](#), City of Madison Fire Department



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City of Madison Fire Department  
325 W Johnson St, Madison WI 53703  
608.266.4420 (Phone) / 608.267.1153 (Fax)  
email: [fire@cityofmadison.com](mailto:fire@cityofmadison.com)  
Last Modified 2/13/2008

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