

## EmpoweringParents®

CHILD BEHAVIOR HELP

### ARTICLE

## IS YOUR CHILD RESPONSIBLE ENOUGH TO BE HOME ALONE? DOS AND DON'TS FOR PARENTS

by Megan Devine, LCPC



Many parents are at a loss for what to do with their older children during the summer months – *they* may get the summer off, but *you* probably don't. That leaves a whole chunk of time to fill each day. How do you know if your child is responsible enough to be left home alone? What if you know he isn't, but he won't stop begging to be in charge of his own schedule this summer?

Before we jump into deciding whether your child is responsible enough to be left home alone, you should know that some states have legal restrictions on how old a child must be before being left alone in your house. The National SAFEKIDS Campaign recommends that ***no child***

***under the age of 12*** be left at home alone. Please be sure to look into the regulations in your home state.

If your child is *legally* old enough to be left home alone, how can you tell if they actually *deserve* to be left home alone?

What if you've tried it before, and they broke your trust by having too many friends over, or by not getting their chores done in the time you scheduled for them?

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While every family is different, there are certainly some good guidelines for how to decide whether a child is responsible enough to stay home alone, even part of the time.

- Does your child follow basic safety rules, and can she tell you where she would go for help if she needed it? (be sure to have a list of emergency numbers in a central place in your home)
- Has your child shown improvement in other areas of his life, such as increased compliance with household chores (even if he disagrees with them)?
- Are you willing to set clear expectations and rules, and follow through consistently with the consequences for not meeting those expectations?

(If your child doesn't meet these basic criteria, don't worry. We'll talk more about how to work towards those goals a little later in this article.)

**Once you've made the decision to let them try being on their own, there are several things you might want to consider:**

**DON'T:** be vague about your expectations. Don't expect your child to "just know" what the rules are. Your ideas about *common sense* aren't necessarily the same as your child's.

**DO:** be very clear with your child about your rules and expectations. This includes any daily chores, as well as rules around how many friends can be in the house at one time, and whether your child can leave your home to go elsewhere. Clarity now means fewer problems later.

**DON'T:** let consequences be a surprise.

**DO:** tell your child what he stands to lose. Just as you need to be clear about your expectations, you also need to be clear about the consequences for not meeting those expectations. Again, clarity now means fewer problems later.

**DON'T:** have nowhere else to go. It certainly is tricky figuring out what to do with your older child if staying home alone is not an option. However, if your child knows there is nowhere else you can send her, why should she comply with the rules related to staying home alone?

For example, if you say – “you only get to stay home alone during the day if you complete x,y, and z, and have no more than 3 friends over at any one time,” but your kid knows you have nowhere else to send her, why should she follow the rules? As a parent, you’re effectively powerless in that situation.

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**DO:** have a back-up plan. Can your child be sent to a parent, grandparent, or family friend? Is there a day camp, vocational program, or volunteer service where they might spend their day? Be sure your child knows where they’ll be going if they can’t comply with your rules.

**DON'T:** overschedule your child’s day. While it’s tempting to give a long list of things to be done each day so that your child has no time to get into trouble, such an approach is unlikely to be effective.

**DO:** leave some empty space. Some chores or daily tasks should be on your list of expectations, obviously. But allow there to be down time in there, too. If there is no benefit to staying home alone – freedom, play time, spontaneity – your child won’t bother complying with the rules that let him stay home alone in the first place.

**DON'T:** force your child to adhere to a strict structure while you’re not home. It’s impossible to dictate what your child does in any given hour while you’re not there.

Think back to your own childhood: if you were left home alone with a list of chores that needed to be completed before mom or dad got home, when did you do those chores? Exactly. Most likely, you rushed to complete them in the last 20 minutes before their car pulled in the driveway. Your kid is no different.

**DO:** Give your child a list of things you expect to be completed by the time you return home. Let her know that while she can choose *when* she does them, she cannot choose *not* to do them. Letting your child dictate the order and rhythm of her day will help her learn to manage her time effectively. It’s definitely a learning curve, so use your privileges and consequences to help her practice those skills.

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**DON'T:** dive right in with leaving your child alone all day, every day.

**DO:** if possible, give your child a limited trial run. Let them know that they will earn more time alone as they show you they can handle it. This will allow you to gauge their ability to follow the rules, and to stay home alone safely.

Begin by letting them have shorter windows where they can demonstrate their ability to follow rules *even when they don't want to*. Remind them that they only earn more independence when they show they can follow the rules as they are now.

If your child is basically responsible – they have a part time job, decent grades, keep up with their chores (even if they do so begrudgingly), you can be a little more generous with your starting point. You might have them in a half-day program somewhere, or give them one day a week to try things at home on their own. Extend that time as you see them consistently meet your expectations.

If your child isn't so good at following the rules as they are now, give him a chance to earn an hour at home by himself while you head to the store or the gym. You might say: 'I know you want to stay home alone all summer. In order to even consider that, I need to see that you can comply with my rules. I'm willing to let you earn a short amount of time home alone as a trial run. To start, when you've completed all of your chores each day for three days in a row, I will let you stay home while I go out for an hour. When you show me you can do an hour responsibly, I'm willing to talk about extending that time.'

Doing it this way lets your child know exactly what skills they need to improve, and what they can expect to receive for that improvement. Break it down into steps, and help them learn and practice those steps.

Whatever your starting point, if at any time your child fails to meet your expectations, you can put them back on the reduced schedule. You might even give them fair warning: "you didn't get your chores done while you were home today. I'll give you a chance to do better tomorrow, but if you can't get them done, you'll go back to a half day again this week. I know you want to be on your own, so show me you can handle it."

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And one last thing:

**DON'T:** make it all-or-nothing. If your child lies, or breaks the rules, don't remove any chance to stay home alone for the whole rest of the summer.

**DO:** let your child earn his freedom back again. Look, kids want autonomy. They want to be able to be in charge of their own day. That's a powerful motivator. Use it to your advantage by letting your child earn back your trust, even if he's broken the rules. If you tell him he doesn't have a chance to earn back that daily privilege of being home alone, why would he follow any of your rules this summer?

Remember, as James Lehman says: you can't punish a child into better behavior. You *can* help your child improve his behavior through the use of clear expectations and consequences.

Find ways to let him show you he's improving his ability to follow the rules. Find ways to help him learn better skills. Keep him working towards *his* goal of being on his own.

Remember – you actually *want* your child to have the skills it takes to stay at home safely and responsibly. You *want* them to learn the time-management and self-regulation skills that will let them balance responsibility and play as they move into adulthood.

The more they can show you their skills are improving, the more freedom and autonomy they can have.

And that will help make a great summer – for everyone.

Too small!

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