



## Home Alone: Is My Child Old Enough?

Whether for a few minutes or a few hours, all parents will face this dilemma—*is my child old enough to stay home alone?* If you look to Ohio's state or local laws, you won't find a minimum age specified. Instead, the Ohio Revised Code says that parents are responsible for providing proper care and supervision for their children. So, the real question isn't so much one of age, but one of your child's maturity and readiness and your ability to plan for safety, emergencies and activities.

Parents need to look at their child's maturity and readiness in three broad areas: physical; intellectual; and social/emotional.

The provided checklist may be a helpful tool for parents to use to determine readiness. This list should be used only as a guide, NOT as the deciding factor.

A child's readiness for being home alone may also be measured by asking the child some of these same questions. Compare adult and child answers. Are there differences in how the situation is viewed?

Once you have completed the checklist, examine the answers. If you answered "no" or "less than often" to any question, it may signal a need for information and training in self-care skills for your child. Certain combinations of "no" and "sometimes" may indicate minor problems and can be easily corrected. Other combinations of "no" and "hardly ever" may suggest the child is not yet ready to stay alone. For instance, a mature child who cannot reach an adult by phone, but who lives in a relatively safe neighborhood with an easily reached emergency contact person is at less risk than a child who will not complete tasks, fights often with siblings, and will not talk about concerns. If you answered "yes" or at least "most of the time" to all the questions, the child may be ready to be home alone. But even if the child is ready, self-care may not be wise. For example, the amount of time the child is alone may be too long, or your neighborhood may be unsafe.

After the child has gained the skills and knowledge needed to stay alone, plan a trial period of self-care in order to see how the child adjusts to the situation. Initially, you may want to present it as a temporary arrangement so that the child knows he or she can choose not to continue if it is uncomfortable staying alone. This will also allow parents to end the arrangement more easily if they feel the child is unable to handle the situation. Children who are mentally and emotionally ready to stay alone, who have been taught the skills and knowledge needed to deal with the new responsibility, who can talk easily with their parents about fears or concerns that may arise, can gain much from the opportunity to care for themselves.