

Children Home Alone

Home Alone (taken from the L.A. Times)

As a new school year begins, parents may find themselves in a quandary about what to do with their children after school. For working parents, it may mean leaving them home alone.

But, when is it proper to leave a child alone? What can a parent do to ensure the child is safe and what are some of the alternatives?

Latchkey children are a cause of concern for many parents, child welfare advocates and law enforcement officials. Some kids left at home may enjoy the independence, while others can feel neglected. Parents often end up worrying or feeling guilty.

Kids end up in latchkey situations for generally three reasons: financial difficulties that cause a previously non-working parent to take a job; death of a grandparent or other caregiver who watched the child after school or divorce. The cost of a babysitter or after-school enrichment program may be prohibitive, forcing children to be unsupervised until mom or dad comes home. Some local schools or parks offer after-school programs.

When is it okay to leave a child home alone? There is no magic number for determining how old children must be before they can be left on their own. California state law does not currently set an age (check your State), however, minors must not be placed in a situation where they are likely to suffer bodily harm, nor can their basic needs be neglected. Experts say parents must consider several factors, including the child's maturity level, time of day they are alone and whether they have to watch over other children. When a parent decides to leave a child alone, it is a good idea to begin slowly, staying away for 15 minutes at a time and gradually lengthening the duration to see how the child fares.

Who's at home? 50,000, or 12%, of California's 4.2 million children 5 to 14, are left home alone for some time during the day. (California Department of Education)

For children 5 to 12, almost 15% are unsupervised when they return home from school. (Urban Institute, a Washington, DC, Nonpartisan Think Tank)

Nationwide, between 5 million and 12 million children ages 5 to 13 are left at home alone for part of every day. (National Crime Prevention Council Working Moms)

In the fall of 1991, there were 19.2 million employed women with children younger than 15 living with them, for a total of 31 million kids. (U.S. Census Bureau)

The number of California mothers with children 6 to 17 who worked outside the home went from 50% in 1970 to 65% in 1980 and 72% in 1990. (U.S. Census Bureau)

Dangers of Being Alone - Latchkey children are about three times more likely than those supervised by adults to be involved in accidents, engage in delinquent behavior or be victimized (National Crime Prevention Council Safety Tips for Kids)

Suggestions For Children: Always walk home with a friend on a safe, well-traveled route. If possible, walk against traffic so you can see a car stopped nearby. Do not accept rides from strangers. Use an answering machine to screen phone calls. If you do not have an answering machine, say the parent is unavailable and offer to take a message. Do not say you are alone or give out any information. Keep all doors and windows locked. Do not open the door to anyone, unless pre-approved by a parent. If someone is delivering a package, it can be left outside. Go to a neighbor's house if a door is open or the house is in unusual disarray when you arrive home. Do not let people know you will be home alone or display your house key on a chain. Avoid watching or reading scary stories that might trigger your imagination and make you feel frightened. Call a parent or trusted neighbor if you have questions or are concerned about anything.

Suggestions For Parents: Teach children when and how to call 911. Explain that they must dial 9-1-1, some children may get confused and look for an 11 on the phone. Have them practice with the phone disconnected. Do not put your child's name on their clothing or backpack; an abductor may be able to gain a child's trust if they use their name. Adopt a family code word and change it occasionally. Teach children not to go with someone unless they know the code word. Keep emergency numbers by the phone and also make sure they are in your child's cell phone contacts. Have a first-aid kit and money in the house in case of emergencies. Leave a loving note for your children to see when they get home. Have an alternative plan in place should your child become sick or injured.