

Keeping children safe is everyone's responsibility



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Home Alone

How to decide when it's safe for your child to be home on their own, and what you can do if they're too young

Deciding if your child is ready to be left home alone can be a tricky decision.

There are lots of things to think about. Plus, there are no hard and fast 'home alone' rules or laws because every child is different. Whether you or your child are comfortable with the idea will often depend on how mature and adaptable your child is - and we all know how much this can vary from child to child.

The advice below is there to help you make up your mind about whether leaving your child home alone is a good idea, as well as tips for choosing appropriate childcare if you decide it's not.

We also give advice on what you can do if you're worried about a child who is being left at home alone.

What the law says

Strange as it may seem, there's no set age for leaving children home alone. The law simply says that you shouldn't leave a child alone if they'll be at risk.

There's such a wide variation in the rate that children mature that it would be almost impossible to come up with a "one size fits all" law. Instead, the choice is left to parents. They know their children best and can use their own judgement.

That's not to say that there are no laws on leaving children home alone. Under the Children and Young Persons (England and Wales) Act 1933, the Children and Young Persons (Scotland) Act 1937 and the Children and Young Persons (Northern Ireland)

Act 1968, parents and carers can be prosecuted for neglect. This means that they can be fined or sent to prison if they are judged to have placed a child at risk of harm by leaving them at home alone, regardless of where in the UK the child lives.

There might not be a specific legal age to leave children alone but it's safe to say babies, toddlers and young children should **never** be left alone, even if it's just while you pop down the road. Even if they're sleeping peacefully when you leave, they could well wake up and get very upset when you're not there to look after them. They would not be able to protect themselves in an emergency and may even try to leave the property to find you.

Advice on leaving a child at home

- Babies, toddlers and very young children should never be left alone
- Children under the age of 12 are rarely mature enough to cope in an emergency and should not be left at home alone for a long period of time
- Children under the age of 16 should not be left alone overnight
- Parents and carers can be prosecuted for neglect if it is judged that they placed a child at risk by leaving them at home alone
- A child should never be left at home alone if they do not feel comfortable with this, regardless of their age
- If a child has additional needs, these should be considered when leaving them at home alone or with an older sibling
- When leaving a younger child with an older sibling think about what may happen if they were to have a falling out - would they both be safe?



Things to consider before leaving a child home alone

No one knows your child quite as well as you do - so use your knowledge of what they're really like to answer these questions. This won't give you a definite answer about whether the time is right to leave your child alone at home, but it'll certainly give you plenty to think about.

- Does your child seem to be responsible and mature for their age and always do what you tell him or her?

- Would they be able to fix themselves something to eat and drink and would you be happy with them using the cooker or microwave?
- Can you imagine how they'd cope in an emergency like a power cut or a flooded bathroom?
- Would they know what to do if the phone rang or someone came to the door?
- Would they know how to contact you or another family member or friend if they needed to? Do they have these contact numbers to hand?
- How would they feel about being left alone - pleased to be given the responsibility or scared by the thought of it?

But remember, if you or your child are even the teeniest bit unsure about leaving them at home on their own, it's always best to be on the safe side and arrange some other kind of care for them such as a babysitter or childminder.