



# Latchkey Children

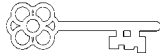
## How Old Is Old Enough?

Healthy Children, Strong Families, Caring Communities

Handout #42

### This handout discusses:

- Considering when it's safe to leave a child alone
- How to prepare your child for being alone



### Home Alone

Is my child ready to be left alone? This is often a very difficult question for parents to answer. In deciding whether your child is ready to be left alone or not, please consider the following:

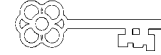
- What can I do to make being home alone the best possible situation for my child?
- Have I done everything that I can to make this situation safe?
- Can my child handle an emergency?



### How Old Is Old Enough?

In California, there is no law stating a specific age to leave children home alone. It is up to you to determine your child's maturity and willingness to be at home without adult supervision. Your decision should be based on a number of factors.

- The safety of your neighborhood. Are there adults available to help?
- Your child's feelings and fears.
- Your child's level of maturity and judgement.
- Your child's preparation and knowledge of safety.
- Your emergency backup plans.

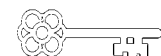


### Planning for Emergencies

To prepare your child to handle an emergency, it is best to look at all the possibilities and plan ahead.

- If your child is hurt or in danger, is there an adult available to help?
- In the event of a fire or flood, does your child know where to go and what to do?
- Does he/she have your work number?
- Does he/she know when and how to use 911?
- What if your child loses his/her key?
- What friends can he/she admit into the house while you are gone?
- Are there trusted adults available that your child can get to quickly, if needed?

If you cannot find reasonable solutions to these emergency situations, it is probably better to consider alternatives other than leaving your child alone.

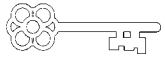


### Emotional Maturity

Consider your child's maturity and judgement. Ask yourself these questions:

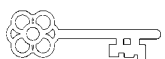
- Does your child seem mature enough to handle regular periods alone?
- Does he/she respond favorably to the trial runs?
- Does your child follow your directions and household rules?
- Does your child cling to you?

# Tips For Parents With Latchkey Children:



## Safety

- Teach your child the signs of an intruder before they enter the house; a broken window, or an unlocked door that should be locked. Tell them to go directly to a neighbor's house if they notice anything unusual.
- Review basic fire safety rules. Teach fire escape routes from all rooms. Never open a door that feels hot. Never go back into the house to retrieve anything.
- Instruct your child not to let people know that he/she is home alone, and keep his/her key out of sight.
- Give a spare key to a neighbor, in case your child loses his/her key.
- Make a list of friends they can let in, or request that no visitors be allowed.



## Telephone Usage

- Instruct your child to answer the phone like this: "My mother can't come to the phone right now. May I take a message?"
- An answering machine could prove invaluable. Your child could listen to incoming calls and only pick up the phone when he/she hears your voice.
- Write phone numbers in large print next to the phone; include 911, your work number, and a number to a trusted neighbor or adult. If you can't be reached at work, be certain there is a friend who can be reached.
- Consider getting a pager or cell phone.



## Snacks

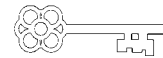
- Give some thought to your child's nutritional needs while you are away. Stock healthy snacks.
- Let your child know what foods or cabinets are "off limits." Have a canister or shelf which is his/hers.
- Give clear instructions for cooking and using the stove, oven or microwave.



## Emotional Needs

A final consideration should be to think of your child's emotional needs. There are a few basic things you can do to chase away the blues and let them know you care:

- Call every day and listen to your child.
- Get a cat or dog to help your child feel safe and provide company.
- Provide a schedule for household chores.
- Be available to assist with homework.
- Give him/her a fun job to do: make instant lemonade, set the dinner table or make placemat decorations.
- Leave a special message for them. You can put these in their lunch, on the refrigerator or bedroom door.



## Trial Runs

If you feel comfortable about your child being at home, try some trial runs. A temporary arrangement allows everyone a chance to determine whether or not to continue the arrangement.

Plan short trips away for shopping or other errands, then try a few days alone after school.

View these trials not only as a test, but also as a period of adjustment and preparation. A good heart-to-heart talk after each period is important.



## The Final Evaluation

You can decide whether or not your child is ready to be home alone by asking yourself and your child if he/she is comfortable being home by themselves.

If after a reasonable adjustment period your child remains fearful, angry or sad, you may need to consider changing the arrangement for your child. He or she just might not be ready to be home alone.

Another alternative might be looking for an after school program for your child. Call Child Action, Inc. at 916/369-0191 for a listing of programs in your neighborhood.