

Is your child is mature enough to stay home alone?

By JENNIFER COLTON

Just thinking the term “home alone” can conjure images of children running amok, having unauthorized parties or foiling would-be burglars with bizarre booby traps. The “Home Alone” mishaps don’t have to be the reality, however, as long as you make sure your child is ready to be on his or her own – and probably not for an entire holiday.

To see if your child is ready to stay home alone, make sure he or she passes tests for maturity, self-reliance and safety.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children can stay at home without adult supervision in the 4th or 5th grade, as long as the child is comfortable being alone. The law in Oregon does not set an age where children may or may not be left unsupervised. But it does set guidelines for child neglect in Oregon Revised Statue 163.545: A person having custody or control of a child under 10 years of age commits the crime of child neglect in the second degree if, with criminal negligence, the person leaves the child unattended or at any place for such a period of time as may be likely to endanger the health or welfare of such a child.

Both the recommendation and the law focus on keeping children safe and suggest a simple number may not be enough to determine if a child can stay home alone. Every child is different.

A good sign that your child is

ready for some independence is a desire to have it. Some children may be uncomfortable being without an adult even at the ages of 11 and 12. If your child does express an interest, have a conversation to make sure she or he understands



what is involved in staying at home and to get a few indicators if he or she is ready.

During – or before – that discussion, decide if your child is able to follow directions and solve problems on his or her own. They should know their own full name, address and telephone number – as well as a parent’s full name and contact information – including the

exact name of where the parent is when not at home (for example, the employer’s business name, not just “at work”). Ask yourself, how your child would handle an emergency? In order to be unsupervised, any child must be able to recognize a real emergency and know how to find help and when to leave the house.

A quick check at Childwelfare.gov recommends evaluating a child’s maturity – not age – to determine if he or she is ready to stay home alone. The following questions may help:

- Is your child physically and mentally able to care for himself or herself?
- Does your child obey rules and make good decisions?
- How does your child respond to unfamiliar or stressful situations?
- Does your child feel comfortable about being home alone?

Another recommendation from the agency is to consider the circumstances: How long will a child be home alone, and how often? Most experts suggest starting small and giving it a test run. First see how your child handles the lack of supervision before expanding the time he or she has run of the house and how far away you’ll be, in case something happens.

Once you’ve made the decision that a child will be left home alone,



Strategies

make sure you have a plan. If the child is going home from school alone, make sure he or she contacts you as soon as they arrive safely. While at home, make sure the child has a way to contact you or another trusted adult, and make sure they know what to do in an emergency or if someone comes to the door. Your child should also know safe snacks they can eat if they get hungry, and where a flashlight and first-aid kit is located.

Also go over basic safety rules – even if the child knows them forward and backward – and review contact and emergency plans before you leave. You can also try to roleplay different scenarios to make sure you and your child are on the same page.

For law enforcement, the biggest priority is making a plan – and making sure your child knows what it is.

“We would just encourage parents to go over plans with their kids for situations like this,” said Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston. “Plan for what to do if someone unknown shows up at the house, if there is a fire, ensure the kids know their address, how to utilize 911 if necessary.”

For more, the American Red Cross offers a course – “When I’m in Charge” – that teaches safety skills and decision-making for 8- to 11-year-olds.

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