Home alone
Advice for parents

NSPCC
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.
**Who's looking after the kids?**

Being a parent is a demanding, 24 hours a day job. Parents are under so many pressures, it's not surprising that many find it hard to cope.

Most parents have to spend some time away from their children, whether it's to go to work or out for the evening. It can be hard to find someone suitable to look after your child and it can also be expensive. But children rely on adults to protect them and parents are responsible for making sure that their children are happy and well looked after in their absence.

There is no set age at which it is OK to leave children home alone. It depends on whether the child is mature enough to cope in an emergency and feels happy about being left. Children mature at different ages, and every child is an individual.

So how can parents tell if their child is mature enough? Is it ever safe to leave a young child alone? How do children feel about being alone? What are the dangers and risks? This leaflet has been written to help you make the right decisions about caring for your child when you're not at home.

Children who are left on their own often feel sad and lonely.

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**What's your verdict?**

Four parents tell us why they left their children home alone. When you've read each parent's story, tick the appropriate boxes to say whether you think their actions were OK or Not OK. Then compare your answers with the advice opposite.

- **It's hard for me to get the baby to sleep. She nodded off just as I was leaving to pick up my son from nursery.**
  - I couldn't face waking her up, and didn't think she could cope until she woke up in just 15 minutes. **[OK, Not OK]**

- **A friend comes in to look after my son while I'm at work, but she has to leave to get to work herself in the afternoon.**
  - He's only on his own for about an hour till I get back. He's quite sensitive for a three year old, and nothing has happened so far, it's all I can do until a nursery place comes up. **[OK, Not OK]**

- **We both have very demanding jobs and really have to put in the hours if we want to get on in our careers. The children have a key to let themselves in after school and they look after themselves for two or three hours. But at 9 and 12 we feel they're too old for a minder and they seem perfectly happy with their computers and stereo.**
  - Often 9 to 12 year olds are not mature enough to be left on their own for more than a very short while and certainly not every day. Before you decide, make sure that your children feel happy and confident about being alone and that they know where you are and exactly what to do in an emergency. **[OK, Not OK]**

- **I'm bringing up the two boys on my own - the youngest is two and the other is just six. The only way I can ever have an evening out is if I go when they're asleep. I'm only going for a couple of hours and they never wake up anyway, so there's no harm in it.**
  - It is never safe to leave young children alone at night, even if they are asleep. What if they woke suddenly from a bad dream and came looking for you? The dark can be terrifying, and there are too many possible dangers that just aren't worth the risk. As a single parent, finding time for yourself may be very difficult. Why not try to find another parent in your area and arrange to take it in turns to babysit? **[OK, Not OK]**

**Now let's look at it from the children's point of view...**

- It's never OK to leave a baby alone, not even for a few minutes. What if the baby had woken up just as her parent had left? For a baby, 15 minutes is a long time to feel abandoned and left to cry alone. **[OK, Not OK]**

- It is difficult to juggle work and children, especially given the shortage of nursery places and the high cost of childminders. But young children should never be left alone, not even for a short time. An hour without you or another caring adult can be very lonely and distressing. And there are many safety risks to a curious, exploring child. **[OK, Not OK]**

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**REMEMBER, IT'S NEVER WORTH PUTTING YOUR CHILD'S SAFETY OR EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AT RISK.**
Don't forget...

Never leave babies or young children home alone (whether sleeping or awake), not even for a few minutes.

Most children under about 13 are not mature enough to cope with an emergency and should not be left alone for more than a very short time.

If children really do have to be left alone, give them clear instructions about what to do if there is a problem. Leave a list of people you trust whom they could go to or telephone, such as a neighbour or close relative. And remember to put all obvious dangers out of reach before you go (e.g. medicines, chemicals, matches, or sharp objects).

Even when leaving teenagers alone, make sure that they are happy about the arrangement and that they know how to contact the emergency services if necessary. If possible, leave a telephone number where they can contact you.

No child or young person under at least 16 should be left alone overnight.

Choosing a babysitter or childminder

Follow your instincts. If you have any doubts about a childminder, babysitter or other carer, don't take them on. Always ask for at least two references and check these carefully.

If possible choose a babysitter who is over 16. People under 16 cannot be held responsible for any harm that happens to a child in their care. But remember that even some 16 year olds may not be mature enough.

All childminders should be registered with the local authority. For a list of childminders in your area, contact your local social services department (listed in the phone book under the name of your local authority).

Listen to your children. If they seem unhappy with the person looking after them, try to find someone else.

What is neglect?

If a parent or carer fails to meet a child's basic needs, such as food and warm clothing, or constantly leaves a child alone, this is known as neglect. Neglect is as serious as other forms of child abuse because the effects on children can be just as damaging and long-lasting.

The NSPCC exists to protect children and prevent child abuse of all kinds. In 1998, we received reports of 3,752 cases of neglected children. And these were just the tip of the iceberg.

Neglected children may appear withdrawn, unhappy or unusually aggressive and their school work or friendships may suffer.

What does the law say?

The law is not clear because it does not state an age when children can be left alone. But parents can be prosecuted for wilful neglect if they leave a child unsupervised “in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to health” (Children and Young Persons Act 1933).

Nor does the law state an age when young people can babysit. However, where a babysitter is under the age of 16 years, parents remain legally responsible to ensure that their child comes to no harm.

For this reason, the NSPCC does not recommend asking anyone under 16 to look after a young child.

Don't keep it to yourself

The NSPCC Child Protection Helpline is a free, 24-hour service which provides counselling, information and advice to anyone concerned about a child at risk of abuse.

If you are concerned about a child and do not know what to do for the best, or
If family or other pressures are putting a child in danger, or
If you are a concerned child or young person yourself

Please call us on 0800 800 500 or Textphone 0800 056 0566

For more information

National Childminding Association
8 Masons Hill
Boreham BB2 1EQ
Tel: 020 8464 6164
(0181) 466 6164

Daycare Trust
Shoreditch Town Hall Annex
380 Old Street
London EC2Y 8BY
Tel: 020 7371 2866
(0171) 279 2866

National Council for One Parent Families
255 Kentish Town Road
London NW5 2LX
Tel: 020 7267 1361
(0171) 267 1361

Local Services:
police and social services

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA)
Edgbaston Park
353 Bristol Road
Birmingham B3 7ST
Tel: 0121 248 2000

NSPCC
42 Curtain Road
London EC2A 3HN
Tel: 020 7252 2500
(0171) 252 2500
Fax: 020 7252 2525
(0171) 252 2525

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Registered Charity Number: 216401

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NSPCC
Grumpy is children next step. TALK STR.