

Children in Self-Care¹

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During your child's school years, you will eventually consider the possibility of your child caring for him or herself instead of being cared for by others. Many children take care of themselves after school, in the evening, on weekends, or during school vacations—whenever a parent or other adult cannot be at home with them. In fact, all children will eventually have to take care of themselves as part of their maturing process. The information and preparation they need to do this successfully is the same, whether they are 11, 13, or 17.

Self-care can be a positive and rewarding experience for children who are ready for it and are properly prepared. It can help them develop independence and learn responsibility. And, it can give them confidence in their own abilities. However, if a child is not mature enough, self-care can be an anxiety-producing and dangerous situation.

Assessing your child's readiness for self-care

In deciding whether a child is ready for self-care, parents must consider several factors, starting with the child's maturity level. There is no magic age at which children develop the maturity and good sense needed to stay alone. Some states have laws specifying the minimum age at which a child can legally stay alone.

Others do not specify an age but consider the child's maturity. Check with your state child welfare agency about the law in your state. If your state does not specify an age, as a general guideline, most children before age 11 lack the decision-making skills necessary for self-care.

When assessing your child's readiness for self-care, consider his or her physical, mental, social, and emotional maturity. Ask yourself the questions on the following evaluation form.



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Signs of readiness for self-care

The following checklist (Table 1) will help you evaluate your child's readiness. Check "yes" or "no" for each item.

Table 1.

1. Is your child <i>physically</i> ready to stay alone?		
Is your child able to...	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lock and unlock doors and windows in your home? perform everyday tasks such as making a snack, dialing a phone, and writing a message? 		
2. Is your child <i>mentally</i> ready to stay alone?		
Does your child....	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> understand what "stranger" and "emergency" mean? recognize danger and know how to stay safe? know how to contact their designated person? demonstrate responsibility, such as getting ready for school on time with little supervision? solve small problems on his or her own, but know when to get help? consider how his or her actions affect others? 		
3. Is your child <i>socially</i> ready to stay alone?		
Does your child...	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> solve conflicts with siblings with little adult help? talk easily to you about what happens at school and about his or her feelings? feel confident enough to contact another adult if a problem arises? 		
4. Is your child <i>emotionally</i> ready to stay alone?		
Does your child...	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> feel confident and secure when alone? seem willing to stay alone? know how to keep him/herself entertained? know how to handle fear, loneliness, and boredom? 		

If you can answer "yes" to most of the above questions, your child is showing signs of the physical, mental, social, and emotional maturity needed for self-care. Your child needs to be capable in each of these four areas before he or she will be safe and secure staying home alone.

Other considerations

Even if your child does seem mature enough for self-care, you will also need to think about some other factors:

- Is your home safe?
- Is your neighborhood safe?
- How long would your child be alone each day?

Your own feelings as a parent are also important. Do you feel comfortable about your child staying alone? Are you ready to give your child more independence and freedom? If you are confident that your child will be safe and will make wise choices while home alone, you will feel good about self-care.

Preparing your child for self-care

If you and your child agree that self-care is appropriate, you will next want to provide your child with the necessary information and training. As you teach your child the necessary skills and information, have your child demonstrate that he or she understands. Have your child repeat the information to you or show you how to do things.

Essential information and skills

Make sure your child knows the following:

- **Important names and telephone numbers.** Post a list of important telephone numbers, such as your work number, the number of a nearby relative or neighbor, and 911, by the telephone.
- **Home phone number and address.** If possible, your child should also be able to give directions to the house. Your child needs to understand not to share this information with strangers, but to be able to give it in case of an emergency.
- **How to answer the telephone.** A child at home alone should tell callers, "My mom/dad is busy right now. May I take a



message?" Your child should never tell a caller that you are not home or that he or she is alone.

- **What appliances to use and how to use them.** Your child must know which appliances you have approved for him or her to use while home alone and how to operate them safely.
- **Your schedule.** Your child should know where you are and when you will be home, as well as how to tell time.
- **How to check in.** Once home, your child should telephone you or a specified adult who lives nearby to report that he or she is home safe.
- **What to do if someone comes to the door.** Your child should use a peek hole to see who is at the door. He or she should let in only people you have specifically said may come in.
- **How to enter and exit the house.** Your child must be able to keep track of his or her key and be able to lock and unlock doors easily.
- **Where to go for help.** Your child needs an adult who lives or works nearby who will help in case of an emergency or lost key.
- **How to handle an emergency.** Your child should know what to do in case of a fire, an injury, or bad weather. In case of fire, your child should know at least two escape routes. In case of injury, your child should know where the first aid kit is and how to handle cuts and scrapes, burns, nosebleeds, bites, poisoning, choking, and eye injuries. Your child also needs to be able to recognize when an injury is serious enough to get adult help. In case of bad weather, your child should be able to identify a safe place to shelter in the house.
- **A back-up plan.** You and your child need a back-up plan in case there is a change in the usual routine.
- **How to come home safely.** Your child should return home along a route you have approved, and know how to let him or herself in and lock the door.



Additional preparation

In addition to teaching your child the essential information and skills, develop rules, routines, and schedules with him or her to help self-care go more smoothly.

Rules. You and your child should work together to establish reasonable rules for when he or she is home alone. Having your child help develop the rules will go a long way toward ensuring that he or she remembers and follows them. As you make rules, consider the following:

- **Visitors**—Decide if friends will be allowed to come to your home, and if so, which friends.
- **Boundaries**—Decide if your child will be allowed to play outside or go to the library, park, recreation center, or a friend's house.
- **Telephone and Internet use**—Decide how long your child can talk on the phone or stay on the Internet so that you do not always get a busy signal when you call.
- **Siblings**—Each child who stays home without an adult needs to understand and follow the rules. Make it clear whether an older child is to be in charge of a younger one or each child is to be responsible only for him- or herself. Be specific about how you expect the children to resolve conflicts or report problems. Give special attention to this situation to make sure that an older child does not mistreat a younger sibling.



Routines and schedules. Developing a daily routine or schedule with your child will help him or her feel more secure and use time more productively. Discuss with your child what to do after checking in—eat a snack, play, do homework, practice an instrument or sport, do chores, read, work on a craft project, or whatever else you agree on. Provide your child with structure—for example, let him or her

know if you expect homework to be done or the table set for dinner before you get home—but also allow for choices. For example, let your child decide between two snacks or decide to do homework before or after playing for a little while. To help you and your child be organized, try posting a weekly schedule where you post other information such as important phone numbers. Also try leaving a daily note in a regular place. In your note, welcome your child home or say something else positive in addition to reminding him or her of the schedule and choices.

Establishing a trial period

Once you and your child have prepared for self-care, begin with a trial period to see how your child adjusts to the situation. Your child will likely feel more comfortable starting with a temporary arrangement, knowing he or she can choose not to continue if he or she does not like staying alone. A trial period also enables you to more easily end the arrangement if you feel your child cannot handle it.



Throughout the trial period, talk to your child often. Find out how he or she really feels about staying alone. Are the rules and routines working? Does he or she feel safe? Encourage open and honest communication.

Also, observe your child. Does your child seem happy and relaxed with the arrangement or is he or she showing signs of not adjusting to self-care? Your child is not adjusting to self-care if he or she is

- talking about being scared.
- not wanting you to go to work.
- making frequent calls to you at work.
- having nightmares or wetting the bed.
- carrying weapons such as shoes, bats, etc. around the house or to bed, or talks of staying locked in the bathroom.
- becoming moody or showing other changes in personality or disposition.
- not doing school work and having other problems at school.

If for some reason self-care does not work out, you will want to look for a good after-school program.

Continuing with self-care

After the trial period, if you and your child decide self-care is working, continue to do what is necessary to make it a



successful arrangement. That is, continue to communicate and plan with your child. Ask about the events in your child's day and about problems or concerns. Remind your child of the schedule and his or her choices. Call if you have to change your schedule. Also, let your child know how well he or she is doing. Tell your child, "You did a good job this week. I can see that you are becoming really responsible."

With proper preparation and good communication, your child is more likely to feel safe and secure and to gain from the opportunity to care for him or herself. You will also be more confident that the experience will be a positive one for your child.

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