



Home alone



It's not easy to decide whether to leave children at home on their own. There are many things to think about, such as safety, your children's ages, how mature and capable they are, and if they could cope in an emergency. If you do leave your children at home alone it is important to have rules and that children understand them.

What does the law say?

There is no law stating an age at which children can or cannot be left alone. However, the law is clear that parents are responsible for their children's safety and they should not be left in situations where they could be harmed.

In many cultures it is usual for older children to care for brothers and sisters. While different societies have different customs, in Australia the law says parents must make sure their children are properly looked after.

- Parents can be charged with an offence if children come to serious harm, or are not fed, clothed or provided with somewhere to live (Criminal Law Consolidation Act).
- The Police or Department for Child Protection can remove children from situations where they are at risk of serious harm (Children and Young People (Safety) Act).

Can parents leave older children in charge?

When a person under 18 years, eg an older brother, sister or teenage friend cares for children, you may be held legally responsible for the carer, as well as your own children if something goes wrong. For this reason it is better that carers are adults over the age of 18 years.

If you decide to leave your children in the care of an older brother or sister or other young person, you must be sure they are reliable. Ask yourself:

- are they mature enough to take responsibility for keeping my child safe?
- could they cope with an emergency such as a fire, an accident or a break-in?

If your child is left alone without a carer, they must be old enough to take action in an emergency and know what to do and where to get help.

When you think about all the things a child left at home needs to know and be able to do, it is a very big responsibility. Think carefully about expecting your child to handle these situations – is it reasonable?





Questions to ask yourself

How safe is your home?

Accidents happen quickly and most parents know how easily a child can fall into a pool, pull saucepans off the stove, swallow objects or play with matches. Parents always have to be alert, especially with young children. There is an even greater need to check that dangerous things are out of reach if you're not going to be there.

Are the rules clear?

It is important to have family rules about what children can and cannot do. These may be different when you are not there or when someone else is minding your children. For example, making a hot drink, turning on the heater, running the bath, making toast, answering the phone, using mobile phones or the internet may seem simple tasks when you are there, but you may decide not to allow them when you're away.

Do not assume your children know the rules. Ask them to tell you what they are and show you what they would do.

How long will I be away?

Will it be for a few minutes, an hour, a morning or a full day? How long you are going to be away will make a difference to what you decide to do. You need to think about the age of children, how they feel about being left and most importantly how capable they are.

What about babies and toddlers?

Babies and toddlers should never be left at home alone. Babies, toddlers and young children have a different sense of time from adults. An hour is not long for an adult but a young child may become distressed. It is also unsafe. What would happen if you left your sleeping baby at home while you picked up your toddler from kindergarten and you were delayed, eg an accident?

It is never OK to leave babies and toddlers home alone, even for a short time.

Who will be in charge?

It is not fair to expect a child to take on the full responsibility of caring for younger children. Their lack of experience may make it difficult for them to take charge especially if any children are unwell, have difficult behaviours or a disability which requires extra care and consideration.

The child in charge should be able to handle any disagreements or fights and know what to do if the other children don't follow the rules or are ill. The oldest child is not always the most capable of caring for other children.

Any child left in charge must be capable and responsible and the other children must feel safe in their care.



Am I sure my child knows...

- where I will be and when I'll be back
- how to use the home or mobile phone to contact me, neighbours, friends, family or emergency services on 000
- their own phone number and home address – emergency services will need to know where to go
- where to find the first aid kit and how to use it
- how to use keys in deadlocks and how to unbolt them
- what to do in case of fire. Do you have smoke alarms, a fire extinguisher and a fire blanket?
- what to do if someone knocks on the door. Are they allowed to go to the door? If so, what can they say?
- whether or not they should make or answer phone calls, make or reply to texts or use social media sites
- how to judge if a child is unwell and needs help
- if friends are allowed over. Let parents know you won't be home
- if they can play outside
- if they can use the swimming pool, if you have one
- if they can go to the shop or visit a neighbour
- the rules about family pets.

If you are going out, make sure the person in charge is able to handle any emergency and knows where to get help.

When the time is right

As children grow up they often plead with you to let them stay home alone. This is normal for young people who are trying to feel more adult and independent. Once again, the age and maturity of your children will make a difference. You may feel confident with a 13 year old who is very responsible, but worry about a 16 year old who may take risks.

It might help to give your children chances to be by themselves for short periods. They can practise the skills they need to be home alone and gain your confidence and a sense of independence.

They can show you they know how to:

- contact you or other trusted people
- respond if there is a problem or emergency.

You could also work out a schedule for them, such as homework, setting the table, playing with the family pet, then free time. This can help them show responsibility and prevent boredom.

What about leaving children in cars?

Leaving your child in a car unsupervised, even for a short time, is extremely dangerous and not recommended.

- Cars get very hot, very quickly. Children can become very ill and some have died.
- Children can get bored and explore the car's knobs and buttons which can lead to dangers.
- Children can become distressed or may try to struggle free from their seatbelts and become injured.
- They may be in danger of someone trying to steal the car with them in it, or be taken from the car by someone.

Children should never be left alone in cars.





Want more information?

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child health and parenting

Child Abuse Report Line

Phone 13 14 78 any time day or night if you think a child is at risk

<https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/education-and-learning/health-wellbeing-and-special-needs/report-child-abuse/report-child-abuse>

Legal Services Commission of SA

Phone Advice Line 1300 366 424, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri

For free legal advice <https://lsc.sa.gov.au>

Kidsafe SA

Phone 7089 8554, 9am-5pm, Mon-Fri

For information about children's safety at home and in cars

www.kidsafesa.com.au

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri to make an appointment

See www.cafhs.sa.gov.au for more about child health and parenting

Raising Children Network

For information about raising children including leaving children alone at home or in cars

www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'What about parents' rights?', 'Safety for young children',

'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years' www.parenting.sa.gov.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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