

home alone

Children need to be developmentally ready to assume the responsibility of being home alone. Try and seek alternative options before leaving a child alone as parents are expected to make reasonable decisions about their children's safety.

Leaving a child at home

Staying home alone is a normal part of developing independence in young people, as they become more adult and independent. The age and maturity of your children will make a difference. Gradually give them chances to practise being by themselves to learn more about accepting responsibility. For example, the first time they are left alone may be for just an hour, and if all goes well, the length of time may increase in the future.

Do not leave infants, toddlers or young children alone under any circumstance.



What does the law say?

In many cultures it is usual for children to care for brothers and sisters. While different societies have different customs, in Queensland there is a legal obligation for parents to make sure that children are properly looked after.

Parents are expected to provide food, clothing, a place to live, safety and supervision [Family Law Act 1975 (C'th)].

Parents can be charged with an offence if children are left in a dangerous situation and are not fed, clothed or provided with accommodation (Queensland Criminal Code 1899).

The Queensland Police Service or the Department of Child Safety can remove children from situations where their safety is at risk (Child Protection Act 1999).

Can parents leave older children in charge?

When a child or person under the age of 18 years cares for children, the question of adult/parent negligence or liability could arise. You as a parent may be held responsible for the carer as well as your own children if something goes wrong.

Who will be in charge?

Lack of experience may make it difficult for an older child to take on the responsibility of younger children and find ways to manage the behaviour of others. If you have no choice then it is important that the child left in charge is capable and responsible and that the other children feel safe. This child should be able to stay calm, decide who to phone and know how to handle any disagreements and what to do if the other children 'play up', disobey the ground rules, or are ill. The oldest child is not always the most capable.

When the time is right

There is a role for your child in choosing when the time is right to be home alone – they may choose to stay at a friend's rather than be on their own at home.

What you need to consider

There are some important points to be aware of if you're thinking of leaving your children at home.

Is your child developmentally ready to assume this responsibility?

In some cultures this responsibility develops early and often it is sometime during adolescence, but always, children need to be well prepared for this responsibility.

How safe is your home?

Accidents happen so quickly. 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 ground rules clear?

It is important to be clear about what children can and cannot do and these rules may be different when you are away or when someone else is minding your children. For example, making a hot drink, or using the toaster are simple tasks when you are there but may not be allowed when you're away. Rules may need to be written and placed on the fridge.

Do not assume that your children know the rules. Talk with them about your family rules and help them to understand the reason for these rules. Ask them to tell you what the rules are.

How long will you be away?

How long you are planning to be away will make a difference to what you decide to do. You need to think about the age of your children, how they feel about being left and most importantly how capable they are.

What your child needs to know

If your children are at home by themselves, they should know:

- where you are going and when you'll be back
- how to get in contact with you

Services for parents and children

- Parentline (8am to 10pm 7 days/week) **1300 301 300**
- Kids Help Line (24 hr) **1800 551 800**
- Community Child Health Service (24 hr) **3862 2333**
Outside Brisbane **1800 177 279**
- Child Care Information Service **3224 4225**
Outside Brisbane **1800 637 711**
- Women's Infolink **1800 177 577**
- *dvconnect* womensline (24 hours) **1800 811 811**
Domestic violence counselling and refuge placements
- *dvconnect* mensline (10am to 6pm) **1800 600 636**
Counselling, support and information

Your local library has a range of excellent books on parenting.

- their own telephone number and home address (police or fire will need to know where to go)
- how to contact the doctor, hospital, police or fire brigade in an emergency (e.g. how to use OOO number, emergency numbers next to the phone)
- the telephone numbers of trusted friends or relatives
- whether to answer the phone if it rings
- the secret family password they can use to tell you that they need help when you phone (e.g. calling you by your first name instead of 'Mum')
- what to do if someone knocks on the door (e.g. dad is in the shower and can't come to the door right now)
- where to find the first aid kit and how to use it
- what to do in case of fire
- how to use deadlocks
- how to judge if another child is unwell and needs help
- areas of the house that are 'off limits' when no adult is present (e.g. swimming pools)
- if friends are allowed, and how many.

Reminders

- Be sure that you have no other choice but to leave your children alone.
- Be very careful who cares for your children.
- Check the safety of your home.
- Test your children on the ground rules.
- Place someone in charge who is able to handle an emergency and know where to get help.
- Check that each child feels safe.
- Phone regularly to check on your children.
- Return home when you said you would.

Look in your local White Pages for your Queensland Health Community Child Health Service and for information about their parent education courses (Positive Parenting Program - Triple P)
Adapted from information contained in the Parent Easy Guide Series © Parenting SA, Government of South Australia 2000.

Published by the Department of Communities. For reorders phone 3224 4225 if in the Brisbane metropolitan area or 1800 637 711 if outside the metropolitan area.

Tip sheets are also available from the Department of Communities website at www.communities.qld.gov.au



Queensland Government
Department of **Communities**