



PREVENTING CHILD NEGLECT — When is Your Child Ready to Be Left Home Alone?

Lately, just turning on the news or reading the paper has the potential to send parents' stress levels through the roof. 2010 has proven to be an extremely difficult financial and emotional time for many families, as the economic crisis weighs heavily. This burden can play out with parents cutting corners on essentials, impacting the well-being of their children. Although child physical and sexual abuse are the most widely recognized dangers to children—child neglect—or the failure of a parent to provide age-appropriate care though financially able to do so, or offered financial or other means to do so, is the most prevalent type of maltreatment in the United States. According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, of the 899,000 children who were victims of abuse and neglect in 2005, 63 percent, or 565,000, suffered from neglect alone. More children suffer from neglect in the United States than from physical and sexual abuse combined.

Child neglect encompasses not providing adequate food, shelter, clothing, or needed medical attention. It also includes inadequate supervision, the focus of this article. In most cases, this translates to leaving children home alone, in cars, or with other children not deemed age appropriate to provide needed care.

While every parent eventually faces the decision to leave their child home alone for the first time, parents need to be sure their children have the skills and maturity to handle the situation safely. The standards for leaving a child home alone can vary from state to state, but The NYSPCC is in agreement with the recommendation of the American Academy of Pediatrics that 12 is the minimum age a child can be left home alone for a few hours at a time. Being trusted to stay home alone can be a positive experience for a child who is mature and well-prepared. However, children, especially those under 12 years-old, face real risks when left unsupervised, including accidents, fires, leaving the home unaccounted for, and the inability to deal with strangers. Parents are usually the best judge of their child's developmental abilities to

handle this responsibility. Some children may be ready at 11, others may still not be ready at age 12.

Working parents and single-parent families need to explore all options available to them to ensure their children's safety. These include relatives, school programs, community resources, neighbors, babysitters or bringing the child to work.

Depending on the laws and child protective policies in your state, leaving a young child unsupervised may be considered neglect. If you are concerned about a child who appears to be neglected or inadequately supervised, contact your local child protective services agency. In New York, that number is **1-800-342-3720**. To increase your child's safety and ease your stress level when your child is home alone:

- Rehearse different scenarios with your children. What do they do when the doorbell rings? How do they respond to strangers on the phone? What will they do if they cannot reach you?
- Set clear rules for what they can and cannot do when you are not home. For example, set rules for cooking, completing their homework, leaving the house, or having friends over.
- Try a "test run" leaving the child alone for just one hour and then explore how they felt. If they were scared or anxious, they may not be ready. Talk to them about their concerns.
- Be sure to have phone numbers posted where you can be reached. List numbers for fire and police, neighbors and relatives. Make sure your child knows how to call 911.
- If your children arrive home to an empty house, be sure to call and check in with them. Ask a neighbor to check in on them.
- Always let your children know where you are—and if you are going to be late.

With the proper guidelines, being home for limited periods of time can increase independence, responsibility and confidence in your children. Please make sure they are ready for the challenge.