

Children Caring for Themselves

Sooner or later, there comes a time in almost every family when an elementary-school child is left home alone. Self-care may be for a half-hour while a parent goes to the store. Perhaps self-care is for several hours every day after school if both parents work outside the home.

Nobody advocates leaving children alone at home, but child care does pose a problem for many working parents. Self-care is the solution many families select for their older children. For peace of mind, parents need assurance that a child knows basic safety and security rules. Children need to feel confident and competent about being in charge of themselves and their home.

Is Self-Care for Your Family?

If you can answer YES to the following questions, you can feel more confident about leaving your child at home for awhile. If your answer is NO to any question, be sure you turn it into a YES before leaving your child alone.

- Can your child recite his/her name, phone number, and address readily, even under stress?
- Can your child accurately take a phone message?
- Can your child accurately tell time?
- Does your child know how to use the telephone to call you or a neighbor?
- Can your child manage the tasks involved in preparing a snack, such as opening the refrigerator, opening a can, pouring milk or juice, using a toaster, or getting water from the tap?
- Does your child know the name, telephone number, and home of a friend whom he or she could contact in case of an emergency?
- Does your child understand the following concepts: stranger, emergency, late, later?
- Can your child read and understand a written message or instructions you might leave for him or her?
- Does your child feel confident about being home alone?
- Does your child have good judgment about which problems he or she can handle alone and when to ask for adult help?
- Do you feel confident that your child will be safe while you are away?

Tips for Parents of Self-Care Children

- Make your home as burglar-proof as possible.
- Remove fire hazards and install smoke detectors.
- Introduce your child to a neighbor who can be called if difficulties arise.
- Post emergency telephone numbers and familiarize children with them.
- Teach children not to display house keys or let a person at the door or on the phone know they are alone.
- Discuss what to do if a child loses a key.
- Try to call home daily at specified times.
- Encourage your child to discuss feelings about being alone.
- Return home at a regular time, if possible, but when you are going to be late, call and explain.
- Consider a pet for companionship and security.
- Provide at-home projects and materials for children.
- Arrange some after-school activities, such as 4-H, Scouts, sports, or volunteer work.

Dealing With Strangers

Fear in small amounts helps protect children, but too much can cause a child to be continuously afraid.

Effective communication between parent and child can be very important in protecting children from harm. Parents may warn children about strangers, but young children often have difficulty understanding exactly what parents mean by a “stranger.” Parents need to clearly explain who a stranger is.

To counteract fear, teach children safety measures to show them they are not powerless in the face of trouble. One way is to have children role-play or act out situations they may encounter. Then, if the real situation occurs, they will be better able to handle it.