



# HOME ALONE

In the United States, millions of adolescents stay home alone after school. As children get older they need more independence, privacy, and responsibility as they venture toward adulthood. Yet, statistics show that unsupervised kids are also most likely to get into trouble between the hours 3 & 6 p.m. What can working parents do to foster their children's budding independence, yet ensure their safety during this time?

## What does Massachusetts law say?

Though there are no specific laws in this state dictating the age a child must be to stay home alone, we know that it is never okay to leave infants, toddlers, preschoolers, or very young elementary school children by themselves. And, it is unsafe to leave even an older child alone overnight or for very long stretches of time. However, much is left up to parental discretion. Parents know their children best, and should ask themselves, "Are my children ready to take care of themselves for short periods during the day?" Staying home alone is a responsibility that one has to be mature enough to handle. Parents should use their knowledge of their kids' maturity level, and common sense judgement.

## Start small

Start by leaving kids home alone for limited time - perhaps 45 minutes on an afternoon when you are running errands. Upon return, ask how they felt. Were they uncomfortable or afraid? How did they spend their time? Encourage your children to talk about their concerns, no matter how small. As they feel more at ease with being alone, and demonstrate they can be trusted, increase the amount of time they are home alone.

## Talk about Safety

**Before you leave them, be sure they know how to:**

- ☐ Contact you, either on your cell phone or at work.
- ☐ Contact another trusted adult if needed, such as a relative, neighbor, or family friend.
- ☐ Call 9-1-1 or other emergency services. Post numbers by the phone of the Police & Fire department, and people who could help in an emergency.
- ☐ Give directions to the house in case of an emergency. Post your home address and phone number by the phone, too.
- ☐ Handle a stranger showing up at the door.
- ☐ Handle an obscene phone call.
- ☐ Use window & door locks, or alarm systems.
- ☐ Take phone messages without indicating to callers they are home alone.

- ☐ Prevent catastrophes such as fires or injuries. Most parents prohibit use of candles, lighters & incense, the stove, power tools, or other appliances when adults are not present. Discuss your safety rules with your kids.
- ☐ Escape in a fire.
- ☐ Recognize sketchy circumstances upon arrival home, such as a break-in. If your children notice a broken window, torn screen, or an open door, make sure they know to leave immediately and call you, another adult, or police.

## Other helpful hints

- ☐ Have your child carry the house key with them - do not keep it hidden outside for thieves to find. Have a back-up plan if your child forgets the key.
- ☐ Have your children call you when they get home. This lets you know they are safe, plus it gives them a chance to tell you about their day.
- ☐ Be clear about your rules and expectations. Is your child to come straight home? Are there rules about whether friends can visit? Should homework be done by a certain time? Are there limits to the snacks they can eat? Are there TV and Internet limits? Are there chores they need to do? It may be helpful to post lists of your rules and expectations on the fridge or bulletin board.
- ☐ Prevent trouble before it happens. Talk to your kids about guns, inhalants, drugs, alcohol etc. Keep dangerous objects and substances locked up. Most parents worry about their kids' whereabouts on weekend nights, yet most experimentation with trouble occurs in the after school hours.

## Babysitting

If your older children are watching the younger ones, it may be helpful for them to complete a Babysitter Training first. These courses are offered by the American Red Cross for children 11 years old and up who want to become responsible babysitters. Participants learn about how to create a safe environment for young children, as well as react sensibly to possible emergencies, from treating minor wounds to choking. Contact your local **American Red Cross** for course dates and times nearest you.

Some information in this tip sheet was provided by the Massachusetts Department of Social Services and *The Daily Parent*, a newsletter for working parents posted on the Web site: [www.childcareaware.org](http://www.childcareaware.org). Visit this Web site to read other parenting articles printed in both English and Spanish.