

Who's looking after the kids?

Being a parent is a demanding, 24 hour a day job. Parents are under so many pressures, it's not surprising that many find it hard to cope.

Most parents have to spend some time away from their children, whether it's to go to work or out for the evening. It can be hard to find someone suitable to look after your child, and it can also be expensive. But children rely on adults to protect them and parents are responsible for making sure that their children are happy and well looked after in their absence.

There is no set age at which it is OK to leave children home alone. It depends on whether the child is mature enough to cope in an emergency and feels happy about being left. Children mature at different ages, and every child is an individual.

So how can parents tell if their child is mature enough? Is it safe to leave a young child alone? How do children feel about being alone? What are the dangers and risks?

This leaflet has been written to help you make the right decisions about caring for your child when you're not at home.

Children who are left on their own often feel sad and lonely.

Child Protection Partnership
Tel: 01224 814646
Email: ask@childprotectionpartnership.org.uk
Website: www.childprotectionpartnership.org.uk

For more information

Daycare Trust

Tel: 020 7739 2866
Website: www.daycaretrust.org.uk

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA)

Tel: 0121 248 2000
Website: www.rospace.co.uk

Local Services

Police, Social & Family Services contact details can be found in your local telephone directory

Scottish Childminding Association

Tel: 01786 449063
Website: www.childminding.org

One Parent Families Scotland

Tel: 0131 556 3899
Website: www.opfs.org.uk

CHILDREN 1st

Tel: 0131 446 2300
Email: info@children1st.org.uk
Website: www.children1st.org.uk

National Child Protection Line

Freephone: 0800 022 3222
Website: www.inforScotland.com/childprotection

ParentLine Scotland

Tel 0800 028 22 33

Highlights the need for affordable, accessible, quality childcare and provides information on childcare options for parents.

Can provide information and leaflets for parents on safety at home.

Local police, social & family services will investigate serious cases of children being left alone. Social services will also provide support to families under stress.

Promotes childminding as a quality childcare and education service. Provides useful information to childminders and parents on caring for children.

Advice and information for parents bringing up children on their own.

CHILDREN 1st works to give every child in Scotland a safe and secure childhood. We support families under stress, protect children from harm and neglect, help them recover from abuse and promote children's rights and interests.

Any child protection concerns can be passed to this number for further advice/information

ParentLine Scotland is a free, confidential helpline for parents in Scotland. The helpline offers information, emotional support and a listening ear.



Home Alone

advice for parents

With thanks to the NSPCC & Children 1st for permission to reproduce this leaflet in Scotland

Don't forget

- Never leave babies or young children home alone (whether sleeping or awake), not even for a few minutes.
- Most children under about 13 are not mature enough to cope with an emergency and should not be left alone for more than a very short time.
- If children really do have to be left alone, give them clear instructions about what to do if there is a problem. Leave a list of people you trust whom they could go to or telephone, such as a neighbour or close relative. And remember to put all obvious dangers out of reach before you go (eg. Medicines, chemicals matches or sharp objects)
- Even when leaving teenagers alone make sure that they are happy about the arrangement and that they know how to contact the emergency services if necessary. If possible, leave a telephone number where they can contact you.
- No child or young person under at least 16 should be left alone overnight.

What does the law say?

The law does not state at what age children can be left alone. But it is against the law to leave children in circumstances that are likely to put them in any kind of danger. Parents can be prosecuted if they leave children in circumstances that could cause them harm.

Leaving young children alone is never a good idea.

Nor does the law state an age when young people can babysit. If you employ a babysitter younger than 16 years old, they are still a child. If anything goes wrong, you will be responsible for the babysitter as well as your own children.

Choosing a babysitter or childminder

★ Follow your instincts. If you have any doubts about a childminder, babysitter or other carer, don't take them on. Always ask for at least two references and check these carefully.

★ If possible choose a babysitter who is over 16. People under 16 cannot be held responsible for any harm that happens to a child in their care. But remember that even some 16 year olds may not be mature enough.

★ All childminders and child carers should be registered with SCSWIS (Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland). For details of childminders in your area see <http://www.scswis.com/>

★ Listen to your children. If they seem unhappy with the person looking after them, try to find someone else.

What is neglect?

If a parent or carer fails to meet a child's basic needs, such as food and warm clothing, or constantly leaves a child alone, this is known as neglect. Neglect is as serious as other forms of child abuse because the effects on children can be just as damaging and long-lasting.

Neglected children may appear withdrawn, unhappy or unusually aggressive and their school work or friendships may suffer.

What's your verdict?

Four parents tell us why they left their children home alone. When you've read each parent's story, tick the appropriate boxes to say whether you think their actions were OK or Not OK. Then compare your answers with the advice opposite.

It's hard for me to get the baby asleep. She nodded off just as I was leaving to pick up my son from nursery. I couldn't think she could come to harm in just 15 minutes.

OK Not OK

It's never OK to leave a baby alone, not even for a few minutes. What if the baby had woken up just as her parent had left? For a baby, 15 minutes is a long time to feel abandoned and left to cry alone. The risks are dangerous too. What if the baby was sick or there was a fire?

A friend comes in to look after my son while I'm at work, but she has to leave to get to work herself in the afternoon. He's only on his own for about an hour til I get back. He's quite sensible for a three year old, and nothing has happened so far. It's all I can do until a nursery place comes up.

OK Not OK

It is difficult to juggle work and children, especially given the shortage of nursery places and the high cost of childminders. But young children should never be left alone, not even for a short time. An hour without you or another caring adult can be very lonely and distressing. And there are many safety risks to a curious, exploring child.

We both have very demanding jobs and really have to put in the hours if we want to get on in our careers. The children have a key to let themselves in after school and they look after themselves for two or three hours. But at 8 and 11 we feel they're too old for a minder and they seem perfectly happy with their computers and stereos.

OK Not OK

Most 8 to 11 year olds are not mature enough to be left on their own for more than a very short while - and certainly not every day. Before you decide, make sure that your children feel happy and confident about being alone and that they know where you are and exactly what to do in an emergency. Remember, it is not fair to expect older children who are not mature themselves to look after a young child. Also, remember that most children value time with their parents much more than material things.

I'm bringing up the two boys on my own - the youngest is two and the other is just six. The only way I can ever have an evening out is if I go when they're asleep. I'm only gone a couple of hours and they never wake up anyway, so there's no harm in it.

OK Not OK

It is never safe to leave young children alone at night, even if they are asleep. What if they woke suddenly from a bad dream and came looking for you? The dark can be terrifying, and there are too many possible dangers that just aren't worth the risk. As a single parent, finding time for yourself may be very difficult. Why not try to find another parent in your area and arrange to take turns to babysit?

REMEMBER, IT'S NEVER WORTH PUTTING YOUR CHILD'S SAFETY OR EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AT RISK