

# TIPS FOR PARENTS

## SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

Children left home alone after school are commonly known as “latchkey children” because they must let themselves into their house after school and take care of themselves until their parents return from work. These children should not be left home alone, even for only a few hours after school. Children left home alone are in potential danger—they are at risk of hurting themselves or being hurt by others.

As a parent, you should take every step necessary to find adequate supervision for your children at all times. Some sources to investigate include schools, family child care homes, boy scouts, girl scouts, child care center, YMCAs, YWCAs, and after-school programs. For more information on where to find supervised child care programs in your area, call the Child Care Helpline at 1-800-332-9227, or look in the yellow pages of your telephone book under child care.

Although your child should never be left home alone, there will be times in an emergency when this cannot be avoided. To help your child stay safe should such an emergency arise, teach your child some basic rules and procedures in advance. Also sit down with your child and establish a set of rules to be followed for those times you will be late. To avoid confusion, these rules should be similar to those enforced when you are home. The rules should be based on common sense.

**The following guidelines will help you prepare older children for short periods of time alone.**

1. **Establish house rules**. This will help your child feel more secure because she will know what her limits are. You should discuss specific rules and the need for such rules with your child. Some rules to discuss include using the telephone and computer, using gas or electric appliances, allowing friends or strangers into the house and leaving the yard or house.
2. **Post important phone numbers**, including numbers for your job, the police department, fire department, ambulance, doctor, poison control center and neighbors. Show your child how to use the telephone, and tell your child not to hesitate to call the appropriate number should an emergency arise. Very young children should be taught how to dial “911” for help.
3. **Teach your child practical skills** that will make her feel more at ease when you are away. Some skills to be learned include how to respond to phone calls or visits by strangers. Also, you should teach your child that she should never tell anyone that you are not at home.
4. **Set up emergency plans** to ensure that your child reacts calmly and rationally during emergencies. You should teach your child what to do if she loses the house key, misses the bus, is approached by a stranger, discovers a fire, finds a window broken or a door open, or is injured. Most important of all, actually act out an emergency situation with your child. This will help your child remember better.

You, as a parent, should also follow rules. If you tell your child you are going to be fifteen minutes late, make sure you telephone if you’re going to be longer. A delay of only a few extra minutes can cause your child to panic. Some professionals also suggest that parents teach their child a family “code word” to be used in case someone other than you must interact with your child. The code word will let your child know that a stranger has been sent by you.