

Responsibility and independence for older children

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Guidelines to assist parents

As parents, you will need to decide how old a young person should be before they are left at home on their own.

Parents have obligations towards their children as defined in the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*. This Act states that as a parent or guardian it is an offence to fail to protect children from harm. Parents and guardians have a duty of care in respect to a child and it is an offence to leave a child unattended. A person who has control or charge of a child must not leave the child without making reasonable provision for the child's supervision and care for a time which is reasonable in regards to all the circumstances of the case.

The age when young people no longer need supervision will depend on many varying factors. Not all teenagers have a mature sense of responsibility to be left alone.

When assessing each individual situation consider the following:

- How far away you are?
- How long you are away?
- How accessible are you (or a nominated friend or neighbour)?

Consider also if the young person has an adequate:

- Maturity
- Sense of responsibility
- Understanding of actions and consequences
- Knowledge of what to do in an emergency
- Ability to follow instructions
- Ability to carry out action plans and emergency procedures.

Note: Young people may be responsible enough to be left alone but may not have the ability to also care for younger siblings until they are much older.

Encourage responsibility in children:

- Ensure emergency numbers are entered into the phone speed dial.
- Establish with your children basic rules around safety and security. Make sure they know these basic rules.
- Rehearse and reiterate:
 - What to do in an emergency.
 - What they can touch, what they must not touch, including the use of electrical appliances.
 - Security doors to be kept locked at all times, access to keys, the possibility that it is better not to answer the door at all rather than talk to someone unknown.

It is important to teach children and encourage them to:

- Understand their own body signals, which will help them recognise when they are feeling unsure or unsafe.
- Trust their body signals when they do feel unsafe.
- Take action when they feel unsafe to make themselves feel safe again.
- Identify networks of trusted people around them who they can call and rely upon to help e.g. friends, relatives, neighbours.

When answering the telephone:

- Always have a list of emergency or network numbers available near the phone.
- Never tell someone unknown that they are home alone – always say that mum or dad

can't come to the phone right now and take a message.

- If a caller asks, 'What number is this?' Reply with 'What number are you trying to call?'
- If you have an answering machine, use it. Only answer calls from people that you know, otherwise let them leave a message.
- If you receive an obscene phone call, hang up immediately.
- Don't be tricked into having conversations with people you don't know.

When answering the front door:

- You do not have to answer the door, look through a side window to see if you know the person first.
- Always ask, 'Who is it' before answering the door, if you don't know who it is, don't open.
- Talk to unknown people through the door or through a locked security door, especially when you feel unsafe.
- **Never** invite someone you don't know into your house.
- If a person refuses to leave, call the police.

General

- Have a plan for when the child is home alone.
- Have an escape route planned for any emergency and a fire evacuation plan and practice these.
- Keep doors and windows locked when inside the house, make sure that keys are accessible and that doors can be opened if there is an emergency.
- Don't allow unsupervised use of dangerous electrical appliances.
- Have guidelines on what utensils can be used for food preparation.
- Practice scenarios with your children to prepare them for all occasions and to help them turn unsafe situations into safe situations.

For further information contact:

Victoria Police

Community and Cultural Division

Concourse level

Victoria Police Centre

637 Flinders Street, Melbourne 3005

T (03) 9247 5306

W www.police.vic.gov.au

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