

**NSPCC**

..... NEED-TO-KNOW GUIDES .....

# **Is my child ready to be left alone?**



EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

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Tear off and keep: While I'm away	<b>Pull-out</b>

EVERY FAMILY  
IS DIFFERENT, SO MAKE  
THIS GUIDE YOUR OWN  
You can make notes on it,  
customise it and tear out the  
section at the back to stick  
on your fridge – whatever  
works for you.



As your child gets older, they'll often want to have a little more independence. But how can you make sure they're safe when they're not with you?

At some point, every parent will have to spend some time away from their child. Work, appointments and family commitments can mean that there are lots of places you have to be. You may even need to take a break and grab some 'me' time.

This guide can help you decide what's best for your child, prepare them for being home alone, and make sure they're safe.

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**Remember**



Your child relies on you to protect them, and you're responsible for making sure they're happy, safe and well looked after when you're not there.

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## Can my child or baby stay home alone?

When you're thinking about leaving your child at home, the first thing you might think about is their age and maturity. Are they old enough to stay at home alone? And for how long? Remember, for a young child, half an hour can feel like a very long time.

Most importantly, you need to consider your child's wishes and feelings.



**The law doesn't actually say what age you can leave a child on their own.**

**But it's against the law to leave a child alone if it puts them at risk.**

All children are different, but follow this advice to keep your child safe.

- Never leave a baby or young child home alone, not even for a few minutes – whether they're sleeping or awake. Most accidents happen at home, and children under the age of five are most at risk of getting hurt.
- Even if your child is approaching 12 they may not be mature enough to cope with an emergency. If you do need to leave

them, make sure it's only for a short time.

- If leaving an older child alone, make sure they're happy about the arrangement and know when and how to contact you and the emergency services.
- If your child is under 16 they shouldn't be left alone overnight.
- Teach your child what to do if there's ever a problem. Keep your mobile phone with you and make sure your child knows your number. Also leave a list of people you trust for them to go to or call, such as a neighbour or relative. You can use the tear out section at the back of this booklet to help with this.

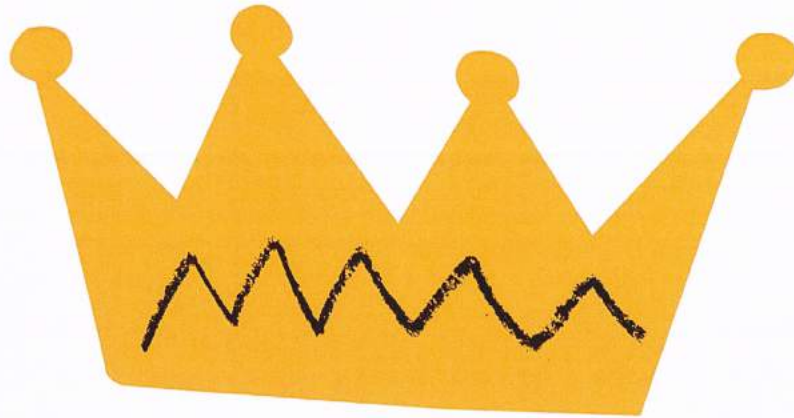
### What is neglect?

Parents can be prosecuted for neglect if they leave a child on their own "in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to health".

If you don't meet your child's basic needs, like food and warm clothing, fail to respond to their emotional needs, or constantly leave your child alone this is known as neglect.

Neglect is as serious as other forms of abuse because the effects can be damaging and long-lasting.

Take a look at the questions on page seven to help you think about how your child would cope without you



## Being 'in charge'

Some children like to take every opportunity to show they can be grown up. They may even be quite keen to be left 'in charge' of the house. But if they're alone, they're going to need to know how to cope with different situations. And remember – a short amount of time can feel very long to a young child facing an emergency.



## IS MY CHILD READY TO BE LEFT ALONE?

Think about how they behave in other situations. Does your child follow your instructions at home? Are they responsible and mature at school?

Then think about how they would cope with anything unexpected. Try asking yourself the following questions, and be realistic about how your child is likely to react.

### Have you seen our parenting advice online?

You'll find some handy tools to help with lots of things, like keeping your child safe at home, and online. Visit [nspcc.org.uk/parenting](https://nspcc.org.uk/parenting)

#### WHAT IF...

there's a power cut?

a broken tap floods the bathroom?

they're hungry and need to prepare some food?

you're out for longer than you thought?

there's a stranger knocking at the door?

Run through a few different scenarios. Ask your child what they would do. Would they feel anxious or stressed? Talk to your child about these things regularly, in a way that's right for their age. By having these conversations little and often, you'll soon get a better picture of what your child is able to cope with.

# How does your child feel?

It's really important to find out how your child feels about being home alone. Listen to any worries they have and ask what could put them at ease. To start the conversation, you could try out this quiz together.



## 1 I'M WORRIED ABOUT...

## 2 I'M NOT SURE WHAT I'D DO IF...

- ☐ I was left alone for longer than we agreed
- ☐ I couldn't get in touch with you
- ☐ Someone came to the door
- ☐ There was an emergency





3 ANYTHING ELSE?

4 IT WOULD HELP IF...

**If you've talked to your child about staying home alone and both of you think they're ready, make some final checks. It can help put both your minds at ease. Remember – you should never leave a child home alone if they're unhappy to be left.**

A few safety checks to think about:

- Are fire alarms, locks and windows working?
- Is there a spare set of keys?
- Is there anything stopping your child from getting food or using the bathroom?

- Is there anything around that could injure or hurt your child?
- Does your child have a way of contacting you?
- Who lives nearby who they trust and could contact for help?
- What can you do to reduce any risks? (Think about where things like sharp knives, alcohol and medicine are kept.)

**Remember**

Build up the length of time your child is left home alone for.



## House rules

It's a good idea to agree on some house rules that suit your child's age and maturity before leaving them at home alone. Talk to your child about what's OK and not OK, and maybe even write up a list of what you decide.



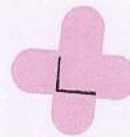
### **How will your child be spending their time?**

If you're OK with them having friends over, agree the limits. How many friends are allowed to come over?



### **Who should they tell?**

If your child uses social media to announce that they have the house to themselves, you could come back to a house party, or unwelcome guests. So be clear about who should and shouldn't know.



### **Put a plan in place.**

**Agree what your child should do if the unexpected happens.**

For example, if your child smelt gas or fell and hurt themselves – would they know what to do?

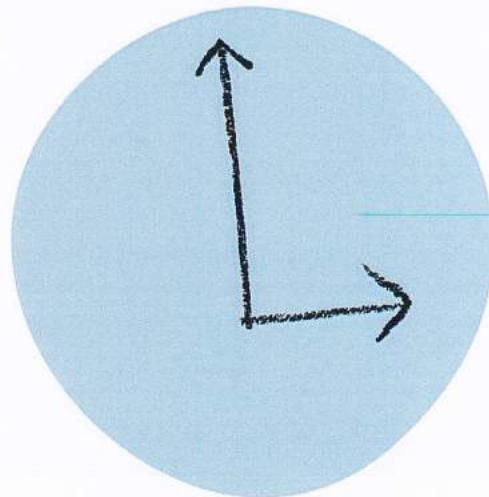
You should regularly review the house rules as your child grows older.

## What if I need childcare?

You might decide your child isn't ready to stay at home alone. Or there may be times when you're out too late, or for too long, for your child to be left alone.

You might be tempted to let an older brother or sister look after a younger child, but that could be difficult if the younger one is ill or something unexpected happens.

It's at times like these you'll need help with childcare. We recommend always using someone who is 16 or above. Thankfully, there are lots of options around.



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"My kids' after school club was great – fun for them, and peace of mind for me."

**Matt**

Dad to Lucy, 10 and Alex, seven

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# Choosing childcare

Choosing the right kind of childcare depends on your child's age, and what they feel comfortable with. It can also depend on when you need it and whether you need the carer to do things like school pickups.



## Some options

- Family and friends that you know and trust may be able to help. You might have friends in a similar position who could share the load with you by doing childcare swaps, or grandparents that live nearby.
- Babysitting circles can be a great way to take it in turns to babysit with other parents you know and trust. You could join a circle near you, or set one up with neighbours or other parents who you know through your child's school.
- Nurseries usually look after children up to school age.
- Childminders take care of children in their own home for a range of ages.
- After school clubs offer a few hours of fun activities in a safe, supervised environment. Talk to your school about what's available.
- Babysitting agencies can help if you need occasional help. A babysitter who hasn't come from an agency may not have had the same background checks, so you may need to ask a few questions before you hire them. Different agencies work in different ways and charges may vary.

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If you have a child between two and four years old, you may be able to get free childcare from the government. Take a look at **gov.uk/freechildcare** for more information.

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## Checking a babysitter

If you're thinking of using a babysitter who you don't know very well, you may need to consider whether they're able to look after your child while you're away.

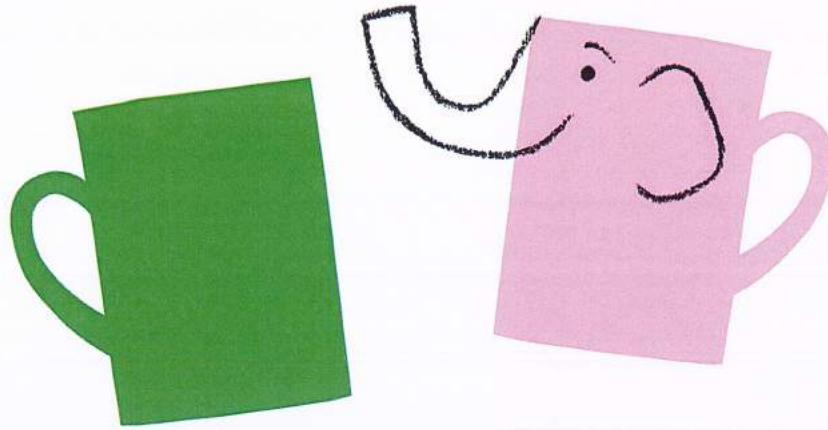
There's no law about a babysitter's minimum age, but we recommend using someone who is 16 or above. Younger babysitters may not be mature enough – or have the authority – to be in charge.

Are they looking after more than one child? Or a child with complex needs? Think about what they're able to handle alone.

Are they experienced? How would they deal with something like your child refusing to go to bed?

It's a good idea to have a chat with your babysitter first. And ideally, get your babysitter and child together so you can see how they get on.

Always follow your instincts. If something doesn't seem right, don't feel you have to go ahead with the arrangement. Talk to your child, and if they seem unhappy about a particular babysitter, find someone else.



## Who can I talk to?

### **Babies and very young children depend on you**

All parents can feel stressed from time to time. If you or someone you know needs advice and support, it's important to get help early on. You can talk to your midwife, health visitor, or GP and there's a range of groups and charities that can help too.

### **Keep talking as your child gets older**

The older and more independent your child becomes, the more they'll need to learn about staying safe when they're not with you. Keep talking and answering any questions that come up.

Friends, family and other parents can offer a sounding board. There are also some great organisations that can give you help and advice.

**Family Lives** provides help and support on all aspects of parenting and family life, and runs **Parentline**.

**0808 800 2222**  
[familylives.org.uk](http://familylives.org.uk)

**Parentline Scotland (Children 1st)**  
**0800 028 2233**  
[children1st.org.uk](http://children1st.org.uk)

**Parenting Across Scotland**  
[parentingacrossscotland.org](http://parentingacrossscotland.org)

**Parenting NI Helpline (Northern Ireland)**  
**0808 8010 722**  
[parentingni.org](http://parentingni.org)

**Family Information Services in Wales** provides information, support and guidance on all aspects of childcare, and children and young people's services.  
[familyinformation.org.uk](http://familyinformation.org.uk)

**RoSPA** has information for parents on safety in the home.  
**0121 248 2000**  
[rospa.com](http://rospa.com)

**Citizens Advice** can advise on things like your parental rights at work.  
[citizensadvice.org.uk](http://citizensadvice.org.uk)



## We're here for you 24/7

If you have any questions or worries,  
feel free to get in touch with us.

Our trained experts at the NSPCC helpline  
can listen to any worries you have about  
leaving your child alone, or any tough  
decisions you're facing.

Reading this guide may have also made  
you think about other children who you  
know have been left alone. Contact us if  
you're worried about any aspect of their  
safety, and we can help.

Call **0808 800 5000**

Email **[help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)**

Or talk to us online at **[nspcc.org.uk/help](https://nspcc.org.uk/help)**



# While I'm away

DATE

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IMPORTANT  
NUMBERS



Name:

Tel:

Name:

Tel:

Name:

Tel:

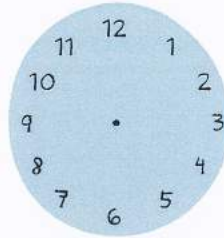
Name:

Tel:

I'LL BE OUT AT...



I'LL BE BACK BY...



REMEMBER

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# A question every parent has to face

When it comes to leaving your child alone, how soon is too soon?

Whether they're staying home alone for an hour or so, or you're thinking of leaving them for longer – how do they feel about this? How can you make sure your child is safe?



Packed with advice, tips and practical tools, this guide can help you make decisions that are right for your child.