

STEP 6

ready yet?

Thinking about the kids spending time alone? Check if your family's ready yet!

Why?

When children are at home on their own, they have no adult to help them if they feel frightened or need to make a decision. If things go wrong, it is a child who has to do something about it. That puts a lot of pressure on children. So it's a **BIG** decision when you start to think about whether children are ready for the **BIG** step of spending time on their own.

If children are ready to spend some time looking after themselves, and they have been prepared for it, it can be rewarding for them. It can be a normal step in their growth that can help them become more independent, responsible and self-confident. But if a child is *not* ready, being at home alone can be frightening and dangerous.

Is there a magic age when children can start staying home on their own?

The answer is NO.

But children need to be grown up enough and have the common sense needed to be safe and feel confident about being home on their own.

What's the law in the Northern Territory?

- There is no law in the Northern Territory that states at what age a child can or cannot be left alone, but the law is clear that parents have a responsibility to look after their children.
- Parents can be charged with an offence if children are left alone in a dangerous situation and are not fed, clothed or provided with adequate shelter (*Criminal Code Act*).
- The Police or Family and Children's Services (part of the Department of Health and Community Services) can remove children from situations where there is a danger to their health or safety (*Community Welfare Act 1983*).

what territory kids say...

"It's fun. I can eat chocolate and watch TV." (boy aged 11)

"I get scared and hear scary noises." (boy aged 7)

"I have to look after my sisters. It's a hard job. I don't like it sometimes." (girl aged 11)

"I got left alone. I hid under the clothes in the basket. I was shaking and tried to stop." (boy aged 8)

"My mum keeps leaving me at home. Me and my sister – we get scared and hold each other." (girl aged 10)



How do you know if your children are ready?



1. Check how each child FEELS about being home on their own

- Does my child *want* to be home on their own?
- Does my child feel at all afraid or nervous about being alone in the house?

parent tips



If your child is frightened to be on their own, talk to them about it. If it's something specific, like the sound of a tree banging against the window, then sometimes just helping your child to work out what "IT" is can make their fear go away. But if their fear is a more general one, then making your child stay home could be terrifying for them.

Try to understand their fear and talk about it. It might seem silly to you, but it can be VERY REAL to your child. If your child feels scared, then you will need to wait until they are older and more confident before you let them stay home on their own.

2. Check the safety of your house and neighbourhood

- Have we checked that our house is safe? (see **Step 1: Make Your Place Safe**)
- Is there someone near our place who could help our children in an emergency? (see **Step 5: Emergency**)
- Is there someone near our place who could make our children feel afraid if they were home alone?



parent tips



Find someone who lives or works nearby that you and your children can trust to help if needed. Research shows that this is one of the biggest things that helps a child FEEL and BE safe when they are home on their own.



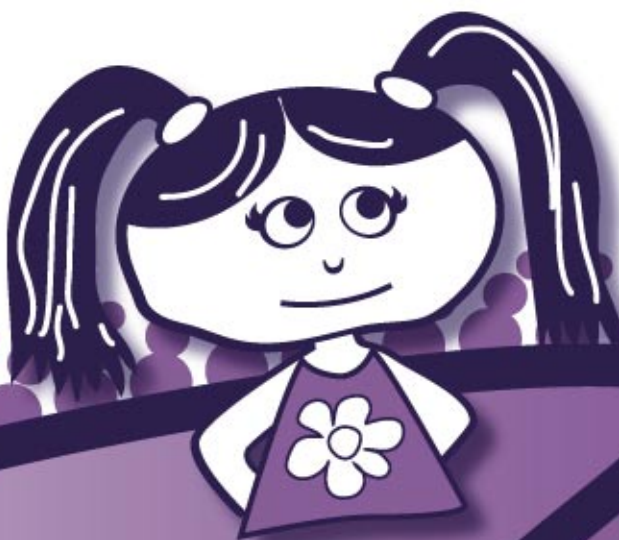


3. Check if each child can *physically* manage on their own

- Is my child tall and strong enough to open and close the doors and windows at home?
- Can my child manage simple jobs like fixing a snack?

parent tips

If a child needs to stand on a chair to reach the door handle, window or telephone, then they are not BIG enough yet to stay safely at home. Wait until they grow up a bit.



4. Check if each child can think clearly and make safe decisions

- Can my child solve small problems without help?
- Can my child deal with unexpected situations in a positive way and stay calm?

parent tips



As children get older, they get better at being able to plan and predict. But they still don't think in the same way as adults. Younger children can know a rule, such as "don't run on the road", but still act without thinking. If a child is to spend time on their own, then they need to be grown up enough to think about what might happen if they don't follow a rule, or if something unexpected happens.

play the "What if ..." game to help you work out if your children are thinking safely

Think of things that might happen where you live, and ask each child what they would do. For example, ask them: What would you do IF ... You saw a snake? ... You got locked out of the house? ... You got scared? ... You got lonely? ... You saw a bushfire? ... Mum or dad doesn't arrive home on time? ... Someone who says they're a police officer asks to come inside?

- If most of a child's answers are unsafe, then that child is probably not ready to be on their own.
- Even if *most* of their answers are safe, you still need to think about whether your child is really ready to stay home on their own.

You can practise what your kids **SHOULD** do in role plays. Make it fun. Take it in turns to "act out" what they could do in each situation. Children learn best by *doing*, so this is a great way for them to learn and remember what to do.

5. Check if your children are responsible enough

- Can I depend on each child to follow the "Family Rules"? (see **Step 2: Cool Tools for Family Rules**)
- Can each child find safe, useful and interesting things to do, or do they need close supervision?



parent tips



Help each child to get a routine of things to do when they're home on their own, especially after school. Bored children can go looking for trouble. Make sure your children have plenty of safe, active and interesting things to do. In this way, they are less likely to do risky things, such as log onto unsafe internet sites, leave the house or experiment with alcohol or drugs. If a child argues over rules or doesn't follow them even when you're around, it might be best to try to find ways they can be supervised by adults. This could be through out-of-school activities, such as sports or clubs, or staying at a friend's house with a trusted adult.



6. Check that your children can talk about their feelings

- Can each child and I talk to each other about our feelings?
- Can I trust each child to tell me if something goes wrong when they're on their own?

parent tips

Help your children to recognise when they are feeling scared or unsafe. Encourage them to talk to you – or to someone else they trust – if they feel this way. (See **Step 3: Feel Safe with People.**)



7. Check what you can do to support your children

- Can I reach my children by phone to check how things are going at home?
- Am I reliable? Do I come home on time?
- Can my children contact me or another adult they trust if they need help or support?



parent tips



Think of as many ways as possible to make sure your children **FEEL** and **ARE** safe when they are at home on their own. Work out some "long-distance" ways of supervising your children, such as phoning in or arranging for a trusted neighbour to check in on them. Be reliable. Get home when you say, or let your children know if you're going to be late. Half an hour can be a short time for an adult, but can seem like hours for a child who is worried or frightened.



8. Check that you have prepared your children to be on their own

- Does each child know the "Family Rules"? (make your own in **Step 2: Cool Tools for Family Rules**)
- Do we have a list of "Emergency Contacts" somewhere easy to see? (see **Step 5: Emergency**)
- Have we practised what each child should do in an emergency?

parent tips

It's important that your children know how to handle unexpected situations at home. If you're not sure whether your kids are mature or confident enough to be home on their own – even for short periods – then maybe wait until they're a little older.



Get ready, Get set, Go!

If you and your children feel confident about the previous eight checks, then *maybe* they are ready to start spending some time at home on their own.

1. **Start with short periods of time.** Try 10 minutes to see how it goes.
2. **Check with each child how it went.** Was there anything that worried or frightened them? Did they feel safe?
3. **Try something else if it doesn't work out.** Maybe that child's not ready yet.
4. **Talk about the "Family Rules" regularly.** Children sometimes forget, so you need to remind them.

Any time away from children can be risky. Parents have said that a quick trip away from their children can end in disaster because of a flat tyre – with the parents returning home to crying, frightened children.

Many parents feel they sometimes have no choice but to leave their children home on their own.

It can be difficult to know what to do. Is it possible to:

- Share care with other parents?
- Change your working hours?
- Use after school hours care?

The **Child Care Access Hotline (1800 670 305)** can give you information on government-approved childcare in your area.

If you want to talk with someone about parenting and your children, you can call **Parentline (1300 30 1300)** or contact a family support agency in your area.



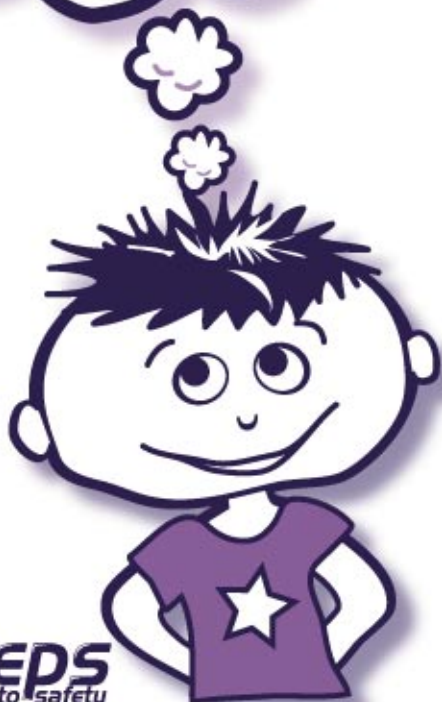
parent tips

If your child walks home from school

- Get them to walk with a friend (if possible) and take the quickest and safest way home.
- Make sure they know how to get to a safe place quickly (e.g. Safety House, shop, women's safe house or clinic) if they need help on the way home.
- Tell them not to talk to strangers or to get into cars with ANYONE – even if they know them. Tell them to walk or run away if someone pressures them, and to yell out "HELP!" if necessary.

If your children get home before you do

- Have a back-up plan if keys are lost and your children can't get into the house. Maybe a trusted neighbour could have a spare key.
- Tell your children not to go inside if the door is already open or they hear strange noises.
- Tell them to lock the door when they're inside.
- Have a check-in system for when they arrive home. They could ring you (or someone else) or check in with a trusted neighbour.
- Make "Family Rules" about answering the door and using the phone so each child knows what to do (see **Step 2: Cool Tools for Family Rules**).
- Tell your children not to let anyone inside or know they are home on their own.
- Tell each child to let you know if anything happens that worries or frightens them.



looking after brothers and sisters

story

Alex is 13. He is home looking after his younger brother and sister while his mum is out. He's a responsible kid and doesn't mind. Tonight, though, his little brother Sam wakes up vomiting. Alex tries to ring his mum's mobile, but gets no answer. Now he's really scared, and he doesn't feel so grown up any more.

Expecting older children to care for younger brothers and sisters can be a lot to ask. They can resent being asked to do it, and the younger kids can resent being told what to do.

parent tips



1. Set clear rules and make sure EVERYONE understands them (see **Step 2: Cool Tools for Family Rules**).
2. If your kids are close in age, make each one responsible for themselves. You can only do this, though, if ALL the children are grown up enough to follow the "Family Rules" and help each other out.
3. Be realistic in what you expect. Remember that older kids are still kids. Is it really fair and safe to leave them in charge of younger ones – especially at night?
4. If you have to leave an older child to look after younger kids, make sure they all know who is in charge and are confident and happy about it.
5. If there are things your children often argue about while you're out (such as TV or doing jobs around the house), get together with them to work out what to do about it.
6. Make sure your children know and have PRACTISED what to do in an emergency, and have a list of "Emergency Contacts" (see **Step 5: Emergency**).



Using the phone

If your "Family Rules" say it's OK for your children to answer the phone, teach them to answer it safely:

- When they answer the phone, only say "hello". If children say their name, the person might pretend to know them.
- Give no information to the caller. Tell your kids to NEVER tell anyone they're home alone. They could say things like: "She can't get to the phone right now, can she ring you back later?"
- Your kids could offer to take a message.
- If your family has a telephone answering machine, you might decide to let it take any messages. This could be a family rule.

If your "Family Rules" say "don't answer the phone", but you want to be able to check on your children, get them to ring you at a set time. Otherwise, you could use a code so your children know who's calling. For example, ring a set number of times, hang up, then ring again.

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Sources

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