

Growing Concerns
A question and answer column with Dr. Marti Erickson
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Question: How do I know when it's OK to leave my children home alone? At what point can I allow them to go into a small store while I park the car? I can't get over my fear of abduction, yet I know my kids need to grow up and be independent.

Answer: These days, with news reports peppered with tales of kidnappings and child assaults, parents sometimes are reluctant to let their children out of sight for even a few minutes. And yet living in fear is no way to live, for children or their parents. An important part of parenting is to give children a chance to learn and practice how to be on their own. That means helping children develop specific skills and strategies that will keep them relatively safe as they take on new responsibilities and experience increasing independence.

There is no magic age at which a child is ready to stay home or go into a store alone. Rather, it depends on the child's skills, emotional comfort, and presence of mind in a crisis. Following are some of the things to watch for – or encourage – as you nurture your children's independence:

- Are your children alert and mindful of what's going on around them? For example, are they observant about traffic and cautious about strangers? In the home, are they careful about closing doors and turning off burners? Can they be trusted to never open the door to a stranger or uninvited guest if they're home alone?
- In the rare event that they ever are approached by a stranger, or even threatened by someone they know, do your children know the three basic steps: "Run, yell, tell"?
- Do your children know how to follow basic emergency procedures in case of a crisis at home? For example, do they know how to use the phone to call 911 or a helpful adult in case of trouble? Do they know how to apply basic first aid to themselves or a sibling in case of an injury? Can they follow basic fire escape procedures even if there is not an adult present to coach them?

- Are your children comfortable about being on their own, either at home or going into a small store? Do they feel confident in their own ability to handle any problems they might encounter?

When you decide that your children are ready to be on their own a bit more, take it one small step at a time and be sure to give your children careful instructions. For example, start by leaving your kids alone at home while you just take a short walk in the neighborhood. Tell them exactly when you plan to be back, review your rules about what they can and can't do while you're away, and give them the name and phone number of a trusted adult to call if they need anything. Then when you return, check in to see how things went and to praise your kids for handling things well. With practice, both you and your children will discover the level of independence that is within their capabilities and comfort zone.

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