

After School Care

Many working parents who have children must leave for work in the mornings before school opens and get home in the afternoons later than the children do. These "hours between" can often present a challenge for working parents.

Child-Care Options

Several options for child care are available to parents. Before making a decision, consider all of the following options:

- After-school educational programs
- Community programs
- Neighbor, family member, or another parent who could assume responsibility for transportation and care at the appropriate times
- Local recreational programs
- Child left at home alone

The kind of care the child receives may vary, perhaps from one season to another or from one developmental age to another; but be sure not to vary the quality of care the child receives. Ask yourself, "What type of child-care arrangement will help promote the positive growth and development of my child?"

Communicate with your child. Listen to his or her feelings and concerns. Find out how your child feels about the various options available. If a child expresses any concerns, make other arrangements.

Important Considerations

If you choose the option of leaving your child alone at home, first consider the age and maturity level of your child, as well as the community you live in. If you live in a neighborhood or area that is supportive and stable, your decision may be different than if you live in an area that is unfriendly and mobile. Also, in general, it is best not to leave a child under 12 years home alone on a regular basis or for a lengthy period of time.

Include in your considerations the number of available recreation areas and playgrounds, the local crime rates, friendliness among neighbors, the ages of community residents, the numbers and ages of children in the neighborhood, and the amount of support you can count on from neighbors and family members.

Be sure everyone is completely comfortable about the decision. If you in any way feel uncertain, you may pass your anxieties to your child, thus increasing his or her fears.

Suggestions for the "Home Alone" Option

1. Make your home as safe as possible.
 - Use locks and bolts on doors and windows.
 - Have proper lighting around the outside of the house.
 - Make sure all poisons and medications are locked up, away from the child.
2. Teach your child proper safety procedures.
 - Instruct your child to call and check in with you or with a designated adult. Have a designated time for check-in.
 - Tell your child never to go into the house after school if the door has been left open, if a window is broken, or if anything else looks unusual. Give instructions to go to a neighbor's house or to a store to call you and to wait for you there. Emphasize that the house should not be entered until an adult arrives.
 - Teach your child to call 911 if there is an emergency. Also, discuss the differences between real situations and play situations.
3. Prepare a safety kit. It is helpful to include an identification card, a list of important telephone numbers of responsible neighbors your child can

- call, the correct change for several phone calls, and perhaps enough money for bus or cab fare. Also, be sure to have telephone numbers posted (yours, fire and police departments, neighbors, relatives). Make certain there is always someone available while you are away.
4. Plan activities that will keep your child occupied. Chores and projects are excellent ways to help reduce the fear of staying alone.
 5. Sit down with your child and go over specific house rules. Discuss what you expect the child to do when a stranger comes to the door or when someone calls asking for you. Role playing is a good way to teach these skills. Consider the answers to these questions when you establish your house rules:
 - May friends come and play with your child when no adult is present?
 - Is it all right for your child to go to a friend's house if the child leaves a note?
 - Are any toys or play equipment "off limits" until you get home?
 - What about cooking?
- Make sure the child knows what is expected, and show appreciation when the rules are obeyed.
6. Set up a routine with your child to help him or her feel secure and responsible. Decide on a time for play and a time for homework and for household chores. Make sure the child has a checklist of chores that are supposed to be done.
 7. Keep healthy snacks and drinks available. Most children are hungry when they get home from school. Let your child know what and how much he or she can eat – either by leaving a note or by establishing a specific snack place in the refrigerator.
 8. Be punctual. Tell your child exactly when you can be expected to be home and try to be there at that time.
 9. Talk to your child about concerns he or she may have.
 10. Be flexible. Continually evaluate all aspects of the situation to be sure your child is receiving the best possible care you can provide. Do not be afraid to change your child-care arrangements. You must feel that the situation continues to promote his or her positive growth and development.