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The Home  
Safety Guru

## LATCHKEY CHILD SAFETY

By Louie Delaware

Every day, there are children who are left on their own in their home, whether it is because one or both of their parents work, do errands or have social commitments. As more and more families face this situation, it is important the parents prepare not only their children for this but also make their home as safe as possible.

### Is It Appropriate To Leave Your Child Alone At Home

As every state has different laws or regulations on when a child may be left alone. It is best for you to check with your appropriate state agency to find out what is allowed as parents are ultimately responsible for the supervision and safety of their children.

Parents need to take in consideration whether their child is mature enough and emotionally ready to deal with the new circumstances and has good judgment. A general rule of thumb is that a child under 10 should not be left at home. One possible way to get the child accustomed to being alone at home is to use a graduated approach, where you start out with a short duration of the child being at home by themselves (letting your next door neighbor be aware of the circumstance) and then increasing the time gradually.

### Helping The Child Become Comfortable

As this will be a new thing for your child, you will need to help them be comfortable with the process. Some of the things that you will need to do to include:

- ◆ Give the child a key and let them learn how to use it properly. If you have a remote garage door opener, go through the process of using it. Once in the home, they should quickly close and lock the door. Let the child know what to do if they come home and the garage door does not work due to a power failure or the remote garage door opener malfunctions.
- ◆ Tell them not to show or share the key with anyone, or give out the garage door code.
- ◆ If they lose their key or the garage door does not work, tell them not to panic. Let the child know that a few of your neighbors will have a key and will help them out if they can't get in.
- ◆ Have them call you once they are in the home to let you know they are safe.
- ◆ If a child comes home to a door that is open, a window has been broken or a ladder is against a window, tell them to not go in and either go to a neighbor's home or call you.
- ◆ Sit down with the child to talk with the child about how they think things went and what their feelings were about being at home alone, and what things they think need to change.
- ◆ If you have a change in plans, you need to call your children and then let them know your new plans.

### Establishing Boundaries & Rules

Establish a written list of Home Rules and make certain that they follow them. Review and update them as they get older and more mature. Some of the rules should cover items such as:

- ◆ When to answer the phone. If you don't have caller ID, you should get it as this is an easy way for a child to recognize a caller. Instruct them to not answer the phone unless they know who it is. If they do answer it and the person asks for their parent or someone else, instruct them to tell them that they are at home but cannot come to the phone. If they do answer the phone, tell them not to say they are alone.
- ◆ When to answer the door. Tell them to never open the door to someone who they are not familiar with. If someone does ring the doorbell or knocks on the door, tell your child to be quiet until the person leaves, or if



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they have to have them talk through the locked door telling the person that their parent is at home but unavailable at the time.

- ◆ The priority of getting homework and assigned house chores done.
- ◆ How much television they can watch, and if they can use computer and video games.
- ◆ Which kitchen appliances can be used and how to properly and safely use them (you may want to make gas or electrical appliances off limits to a child).
- ◆ When and if friends can come into the home.
- ◆ Ensure that they take the same route home every day.

### **Making The Home Safe**

To make your home as safe as possible, you should consider doing the following:

- ◆ Have a printed list of emergency contacts. A good one to use is at [www.ColoradoChildproofers.com/Library/Emergency\\_Contact\\_List.doc](http://www.ColoradoChildproofers.com/Library/Emergency_Contact_List.doc). Show the child where the list is always located (preferably on the inside of a cabinet door above the kitchen phone).
- ◆ Ensure that your child knows all of your phone numbers where you can be accessed. Better yet, if the child is responsible enough, get them a cell phone so they can call you in an emergency (come up with a way for them to alert you that there is an emergency, like if you don't answer on the first try that they are to keep trying until you do answer).
- ◆ Make certain that dangerous items are under lock and key, such as firearms, ammunition, alcoholic beverages and the like.
- ◆ Have a fire and emergency escape plan and practice it, especially when the child is not expecting it, like at night. Sound the various alarms that you may at your home (e.g., smoke, carbon monoxide and security alarm system) and what they should do if they are activated. And tell them never go back into a burning building, regardless of the situation.
- ◆ Show them where the First Aid Kit is located and how to use it.
- ◆ To help the child feel more comfortable at home, consider getting a dog. If someone is at the door, a barking dog may be enough to scare them away.
- ◆ In case there is a power failure at your home, either have one phone in your home that is wired or get a cell phone for the child so they can call you at any time.

A little advance preparedness in having the child being alone at home will make the transition be much easier for everyone. And over time your child will feel even more independent.

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