

# Home alone

Your guide to keeping  
your child safe



Advice and support  
for parents

NSPCC   
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.™



As a mum or dad, looking after your child is your number one priority. But there will be times when you need to spend time away from your child, to go to work, go out for the evening or just go shopping.

There's no legally set age at which it's OK to leave your child at home alone. It depends on whether your child is mature enough to cope in an emergency and feels happy about being left. Children mature at different ages and every child is an individual.

Your children rely upon you to protect them and you are responsible for making sure they are happy, safe and well looked after in your absence.

So how can you tell if your child is mature enough? Is it ever safe to leave a child alone? What are the dangers and risks of leaving your child at home alone?

We have collected the best advice from professionals as well as some tips from other mums and dads, to help you decide whether to leave your child at home alone and what you need to do if you're not there.



# Remember

- **Never leave a baby or young child home alone**, not even for a few minutes, regardless of whether they are sleeping or awake. The most common place for accidents is at home and children under the age of five are the most injured group.
- **If your child is under the age of 12** they may not be mature enough to cope with an emergency. If you do need to leave them, ensure it is only for a short time. Make sure the obvious dangers such as medicines, matches and sharp objects are out of reach.
- **If leaving older children alone** make sure they are happy about the arrangement and know when and how to contact you and emergency services.
- **If your child is under the age of 16** they should not be left alone overnight.
- **Teach your child about what to do if there is ever a problem.** Keep your mobile phone with you and make sure your child knows your number so they can call you if you're needed. Leave a list of people you trust for them to go to or call, such as a neighbour, relative or close friend.



## Did you know?

There is no legal age limit for leaving a child on their own, but it's an offence to do so if it places them at risk. Parents can be prosecuted for neglect if they leave a child unsupervised "in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to health".

Children and Young Persons Act 1933 (England and Wales), Children and Young Persons (Scotland) Act and Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1968.

## What is neglect?

If you fail to meet your child's basic needs, such as food and warm clothing, fail to respond to your child's emotional needs or constantly leave your child alone this is known as neglect. Neglect is as serious as other forms of child abuse because the effects can be damaging and long-lasting.

## Find out more

### NSPCC

Help and advice on a range of topics to keep children safe  
[www.nspcc.org.uk/parentingadvice](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/parentingadvice)  
0808 800 5000  
[help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

### RoSPA

Information for parents on safety in the home.  
[www.rospace.com](http://www.rospace.com)  
0121 248 2000  
[help@rospace.com](mailto:help@rospace.com)

# What's your view?



Jane Petrie advises the NSPCC on parenting and is a mother of three. Here she offers advice to three parents about leaving their children home alone.

## Problems sleeping

"It is hard to get the baby to sleep during the day. She nodded off just as I was leaving to collect my son from nursery and I couldn't face waking her up. It is only round the corner, and I didn't think that she would come to any harm in just 15 minutes, so I left her at home while I got my son."

**Fiona, mother of Ben, three, and Izzy, seven months.**

**Jane says,** "I understand your frustration especially if you too are tired but leaving a baby alone, out of sight and hearing is very dangerous. 15 minutes is long enough for a child to choke or to become extremely anxious if they cry and get no response. On occasions like this, it might be better to ring another parent from nursery, or a neighbour and ask them to bring your son home for you."



## Find out more

### Family Lives

A national charity providing help and support in all aspects of family life

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

### Family and Childcare Trust

Practical advice for families to find the right childcare and to access local services  
[www.familyandchildcaretrust.org](http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org)  
0845 872 6260  
[info@familyandchildcaretrust.org](mailto:info@familyandchildcaretrust.org)

### Gingerbread

Advice and support for single parents  
[www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)  
0808 802 0925



## After school

“We both have jobs that require long hours. We take turns to get home as early as possible, usually around six, but that means the boys have to let themselves into the house and look after themselves for a few hours. We have ensured they have emergency numbers and have taught them not to open the door to strangers.”

**Scott and Liz, parents of James, 11, and Josh, nine.**

**Jane says,** “Your sons are still too young to be left alone for these periods on such a regular basis. Some schools provide after school clubs, sports activities or homework groups to assist parents to manage these gaps. Ask your school about what’s available locally. Perhaps there are friends or neighbours who would look after the boys some afternoons, or at least who can be available for the boys to visit or call if they are upset by anything.”

## Social life

“I am bringing up my children on my own and the only way I can get an evening out is to wait until they are asleep at night. I only pop out for a couple of hours and they never wake up, so where’s the harm in that?”

**Pat, with Billy, six, and Sean, two.**

**Jane says,** “Wanting some time out for yourself is perfectly OK, but leaving young children alone at night even if they are asleep is very risky. What if they became unwell, or had a bad dream? They would be very frightened if they could not find you at home. Finding time for yourself, especially for a lone parent, can be difficult, but it is never worth putting your child’s safety or emotional wellbeing at risk. Could you ask family or friends for help? You might consider finding other parents in a similar position and arranging babysitting sleepovers so you can take turns to go out.”

Remember it’s never worth putting your child’s safety or emotional wellbeing at risk.

# Do you need a babysitter

**It is OK for you to make time for yourself, but only if your child is safe and appropriately cared for. If you are nervous about leaving your child, use someone you trust, like grandparents or a friend to begin with, before you use babysitters.**

## Babysitters

When deciding if you need to use a babysitter or a childminder, it's useful to think about the needs of the child, the length of time you are away and the skills of your chosen carer.

The needs of very young children, children who are sick and some disabled children are greater than older, healthy children. If there are a number of children under five, this may also be a factor to consider. In these circumstances you should be looking for reliable, experienced babysitters over the age of 16.

A child with challenging behaviour, regardless of their age, may need to have an older, experienced babysitter in order to remain safe.

Older siblings may also find their younger brothers and sisters are less cooperative when they are in charge for a long period so a babysitter might

be a better option. If the period of time you are away from home includes an all night or late night absence, you should use a babysitter who is over the age of 16.

## Childminders

If you need reliable, regular childcare, find a childminder. Childminders offer a safe home environment for your children before and after school. In addition to taking your child to and from school they can cover holidays, giving your child security and continuity. Childminders have to register with the appropriate authorities and they and their homes are checked through this process. They are monitored against national standards, trained in skills such as first aid, food hygiene and behaviour management and many have child care qualifications. They also have public liability insurance and have insurance to use their car for business use.



# er or childminder?

## Things to check out when selecting a babysitter or childminder

- **Check the babysitter's age.** Although there are no laws about the age of the babysitter, you need to think hard before using a young person under 16. If you use a younger sitter and harm comes to your child, you may be held responsible. And remember even a 16-year-old may not be mature enough.
- **Follow your instincts.** If you have any doubts about a childminder, babysitter or other carer, don't take them on. Always ask for at least two references and check these carefully.
- **Listen to your child.** If your child seems to be unhappy about a particular babysitter, find someone else.

## Questions to ask a potential babysitter or childminder

- What experience do you have of looking after children?
- Do you have first aid skills?
- What do you enjoy most about looking after children?
- What do you think is unacceptable behaviour?
- How would you deal with unacceptable behaviour?
- What would you do in an emergency?



## Find out more

### For information and advice on choosing a child minder

Professional Association for  
Childcare and Early Years  
(England and Wales)  
[www.pacey.org.uk](http://www.pacey.org.uk)  
0845 880 0044

Northern Ireland Childminding  
Association (NICMA)  
[www.nicma.org](http://www.nicma.org)  
0871 200 2063

Scottish Childcare (SCMA)  
[www.childminding.org](http://www.childminding.org)  
01786 449063

# Worried about a child?

Don't wait until you're certain, contact the NSPCC. Trained helpline counsellors are ready to offer expert help, advice and support 24/7. It's free, and you don't have to say who you are.

Call 0808 800 5000, text 88858 (or 0778 620 0001\* for the Channel Islands and Isle of Man), email [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk) or visit [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline)

If you are hard of hearing, contact us via [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline)

\*This service will be charged at your standard network rate.



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**NSPCC**  
Weston House  
42 Curtain Road  
London EC2A 3NH  
[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)  
0808 800 5000

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

Registered charity numbers 216401 and SC037717.  
Photography by Jon Challicom and Getty Images, posed by models. Stores code: NS279. Updated August 2013.  
Job number: 2013563.

## More advice from the NSPCC

### Our parenting pack

If you've found this leaflet useful, you might like to try some of the other titles in our parenting pack. They include plenty of advice on practical, positive parenting, and cover subjects like managing stress, listening to children and keeping your child safe when they're out alone.

To request a pack, email [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk) or call 0808 800 5000, mentioning the parenting pack or download copies from [www.nspcc.org.uk/parenting](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/parenting)



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