





# Don't forget...


 **Never** leave babies or young children home alone (whether sleeping or awake), not even for a few minutes.

 Most children under about 13 are not mature enough to cope with an emergency and should not be left alone for more than a very short time.



 If children really do have to be left alone, give them clear instructions about what to do if there is a problem. Leave a list of people you trust whom they could go to or telephone, such as a neighbour or close relative. And remember to put all obvious dangers out of reach before you go (eg. medicines, chemicals, matches, or sharp objects).

 Even when leaving teenagers alone, make sure that they are happy about the arrangement and that they know how to contact the emergency services if necessary. If possible, leave a telephone number where they can contact you.

 No child or young person under at least 16 should be left alone overnight.

## Choosing a babysitter or childminder

★ 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.

★ If possible choose a babysitter who is over 16. People under 16 cannot be held responsible for any harm that happens to a child in their care. But remember that even some 16 year olds may not be mature enough.

★ All childminders should be registered with the local authority. For a list of childminders in your area, contact your local social services department (listed in the phone book under the name of your local authority).

★ Listen to your children. If they seem unhappy with the person looking after them, try to find someone else.

## What does the law say?

The law is not clear because it does not state an age when children can be left alone. But parents can be prosecuted for **wilful 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).

Nor does the law state an age when young people can babysit. However, where a baby-sitter is under the age of 16 years, parents remain legally responsible to ensure that their child comes to no harm.

For this reason, the NSPCC does not recommend asking anyone under 16 to look after a young child.

## What is neglect?

If a parent or carer fails to meet a child's basic needs, such as food and warm clothing, or constantly leaves a child alone, this is known as **neglect**. Neglect is as serious as other forms of child abuse because the effects on children can be just as damaging and long-lasting.

The NSPCC exists to protect children and prevent child abuse of all kinds. In 1998, we received reports of 3,752 cases of neglected children. And these were just the tip of the iceberg.



Neglected children may appear withdrawn, unhappy or unusually aggressive and their school work or friendships may suffer.

## Don't keep it to yourself

The NSPCC Child Protection Helpline is a free, 24-hour service which provides counselling, information and advice to anyone concerned about a child at risk of abuse.

- If you are concerned about a child and do not know what to do for the best, or
- If family or other pressures are putting a child in danger, or
- If you are a concerned child or young person yourself

Please Call us on 0808 800 5000  
or Textphone 0800 056 0566



## Contact addresses

**National Childminding Association**  
8 Masons Hill  
Bromley  
Kent  
BR2 9EY  
Tel: 020 8464 6164  
Website: [www.ncma.org.uk](http://www.ncma.org.uk)

Promotes childminding as a quality childcare and education service. Can provide useful information about best practice in childminding.

**Daycare Trust**  
21 St. George's Road  
London  
SE1 6ES  
Tel: 020 7840 3350  
Website: [www.daycaretrust.org.uk](http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk)

Highlights the need for affordable, accessible, quality childcare and provides information on childcare options for parents.

**National Council for One Parent Families**  
255 Kentish Town Road  
London  
NW5 2LX  
Tel: 020 7428 5400  
Helpline: 0800 018 5026 (9.15am - 5.15pm)  
Website: [www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk](http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk)

Provides a range of useful leaflets and can advise single parents on benefits and maintenance.

**Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA)**  
Edgbaston Park  
353 Bristol Park  
Birmingham  
B5 7ST  
Tel: 0121 248 2000  
Website: [www.rospace.co.uk](http://www.rospace.co.uk)

Can provide information and leaflets for parents on safety at home.

**Local Services**  
Police and social services contact details can be found in your local telephone directory.

Local police and social services will investigate serious cases of children being left alone. Social services will also provide support to families under stress.

**NSPCC**  
Publications and Information Unit  
Weston House  
42 Curtain Road  
London  
EC2A 3NH  
Tel: 020 7825 2500  
Website: [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

The NSPCC offers a wide range of resources including parenting publications. For more information please send an A4 SAE (with three 1st class stamps) to the Publications and Information Unit (see left).

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**NSPCC**  
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.

# Home alone

## Advice for parents



**NSPCC**  
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.

# Who's looking after the kids?

Being a parent is a demanding, 24 hours a day job. Parents are under so many pressures, it's not surprising that many find it hard to cope.

Most parents have to spend some time away from their children, whether it's to go to work or out for the evening. It can be hard to find someone suitable to look after your child, and it can also be expensive. But children rely on adults to protect them and parents are responsible for making sure that their children are happy and well looked after in their absence.

There is no set age at which it is OK to leave children home alone. It depends on whether the 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.





Children who are left on their own often feel sad and lonely.

So how can parents tell if their child is mature enough? Is it ever safe to leave a young child alone? How do children feel about being alone? What are the dangers and risks? This leaflet has been written to help you make the right decisions about caring for your child when you're not at home.

# What's your verdict?

Four parents tell us why they left their children home alone. When you've read each parent's story, tick the appropriate boxes to say whether **you** think their actions were OK or Not OK. Then compare your answers with the advice opposite.

## Now let's look at it from the children's point of view ...

<p>“ It's hard for me to get the baby to sleep. She nodded off just as I was leaving to pick up my son from nursery. ”</p>	<p>I couldn't face waking her up, and didn't think she could come to any harm in just 15 minutes. ”</p>	 <p><input type="checkbox"/> OK <input type="checkbox"/> Not OK</p>	<p>It's <b>never</b> OK to leave a baby alone, not even for a few minutes. What if the baby had woken up just as</p>	<p>her parent had left? For a baby, 15 minutes is a long time to feel abandoned and left to cry alone.</p>	<p>The risks are dangerous too. What if the baby was sick or there was a fire?</p>
<p>“ A friend comes in to look after my son while I'm at work, but she has to leave to get to work herself in the afternoon. ”</p>	<p>He's only on his own for about an hour till I get back. He's quite sensible for a three year old, and nothing has</p>	<p>happened so far. It's all I can do until a nursery place comes up. ”</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> OK <input type="checkbox"/> Not OK</p>	<p>It is difficult to juggle work and children, especially given the shortage of nursery places and the high cost of childcare.</p>	<p>But young children should <b>never</b> be left alone, not even for a short time. An hour without you or another caring adult can</p>	<p>be very lonely and distressing. And there are many safety risks to a curious, exploring child.</p>
<p>“ We both have very demanding jobs and really have to put in the hours if we want to get on in our careers. The children have a key to let themselves in after school and they look</p>	<p>after themselves for two or three hours. But at 9 and 12 we feel they're too old for a minder and they seem perfectly happy with their computers and stereos. ”</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> OK <input type="checkbox"/> Not OK</p>	<p>Most 9 to 12 year olds are not mature enough to be left on their own for more than a very <b>short</b> while – and</p>	<p>certainly not every day. Before you decide, make sure that your children feel happy and confident about being alone and that they know where you are and exactly what to do in an emergency.</p>	<p>Remember, it is not fair to expect older children who are not mature themselves to look after a young child. Also, remember that most children value time with their parents much more than material things.</p>
<p>“ I'm bringing up the two boys on my own - the youngest is two and the other is just six. The only way I can ever have an evening out is</p>	<p>if I go when they're asleep. I'm only gone for a couple of hours and they never wake up anyway, so there's no harm in it. ”</p>	 <p><input type="checkbox"/> OK <input type="checkbox"/> Not OK</p>	<p>It is <b>never</b> safe to leave young children alone at night, even if they are asleep. What if they woke suddenly from a bad</p>	<p>dream and came looking for you? The dark can be terrifying, and there are too many possible dangers that just aren't worth the risk. As a single</p>	<p>parent, finding time for yourself may be very difficult. Why not try to find another parent in your area and arrange to take it in turns to babysit?</p>

**REMEMBER, IT'S NEVER WORTH PUTTING YOUR CHILD'S SAFETY OR EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AT RISK.**