



CHILDREN'S
AID SOCIETY
of TORONTO

LA SOCIÉTÉ
DE L'AIDE à
L'ENFANCE
DE TORONTO



Home Alone

How do you know when your kids can be left unsupervised?

Your six-year-old awakens from a bad dream. Padding into your bedroom, he sees you're not there. Searching the house in vain, he realizes he's home alone. And unlike the movie, there's nothing funny about it.

Leaving a child unsupervised is dangerous. It can lead to disaster and it's against the law. Although the legal term abandonment implies leaving a child with no intent to return, it's more common for parents to leave their children alone for short periods of time.

There is no law in Ontario that dictates a specific age at which a child can be left unsupervised. The law is purposefully vague when it comes to choosing a specific age, because there are many variables to take into consideration. One eleven-year-old may feel comfortable being left alone, and knows what to do in case of an emergency, while another eleven-year-old may feel nervous and unsure of himself.

When leaving children alone for the first time, parents should speak with them to see if they feel comfortable on their own. Explain to the child where you are going, and specify how long you'll be gone. Make sure that the child is emotionally and physically ready to be left alone.

Potential household hazards that threaten children's lives are everywhere. They lurk in the kitchen, the bathroom and the playroom. They come in different shapes, colours and sizes, and they can creep up on children even when parents are at home. These threats can be poisonous substances, unguarded stairwells, or balconies made

accessible due to open doors and windows. Children, especially very young children, are not able to remove themselves from hazardous situations. In fact, even if children can remove themselves from danger, they may not realize when something poses a threat, and so it is important for parents to pay close attention to their child's development.

When parents decide that their children are mature and responsible enough to be left unsupervised, that judgement should be accompanied by a safety plan, so that children know how to respond to different scenarios when home alone. Children should know how to dial 911, and what to do in case of a fire. Other rules should be in place in case someone phones, or comes to the door. Children shouldn't answer the door, and if someone calls, it's wise to say that their mom or dad is in the shower or unavailable at the moment. These are simple tactics to teach children, but may prove very useful. If someone can't be in the house with children when parents aren't home, neighbours can help by keeping an eye on the house, and parents should always leave a phone number where they can be contacted, in case of emergency.

Five patterns of suspicious behaviour

Parents who leave their children unattended base their decision on the maturity level of their own children, and must ensure that their children will be safe. If they are referred to a children's aid society (CAS) and if police deem that children should not have been left alone, they can be criminally charged with abandonment.

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If a CAS is called to investigate, child protection workers look for patterns:

Has the parent left the child unattended in the past?

Is the parent likely to leave the child unattended in the future?

What is the parent's reaction when he or she is confronted about leaving the child alone?

Does the parent understand the dangers that their actions posed for the health and safety of the child?

How long was the child left unattended?

If neighbours know for certain that a child has been left unsupervised they should immediately phone for help. They can contact us or their local CAS. If it's a high risk situation, say a toddler's been spotted on a balcony, we will call the police and they will send a car over immediately. Neighbours should call their local CAS or the police, if they suspect that a child's been left alone, and is in imminent danger.

Unlike child supervision or lack thereof, wandering occurs by accident, usually when children escape the watchful eye of parents, or parents are not mindful. A parent may fall asleep, and a door or window is accessible to a child who is able to crawl or walk itself into a dangerous situation.

There was the case of a five-year-old girl, who was found wandering in her apartment complex. Her mother took some medication, and fell asleep. Parents and caregivers must

always be on alert when watching children. Parents should also be aware when on new medication, and watch for side effects such as drowsiness. If a parent is feeling ill, or drowsy, they should call a friend to supervise the child for a short period of time.

Babysitting is the age-old alternative to leaving children alone. Although the law doesn't designate when a young person is old enough to baby sit, parents can do their part in safeguarding their children, by hiring people who have experience, references and training. Services like St. John Ambulance, teach a babysitting course, which includes first aid and emergency procedures.

Parents can get information from community services when searching for a daycare provider. Local schools are a good source, secretaries know all the local mothers who watch kids. Parents need to look for someone responsible, who knows how to react to all situations and health concerns.

Leaving children alone for the first time can be overwhelming for both parents and children. Knowing when children are emotionally ready for this responsibility, and putting safety strategies in place, is all part of the important planning.