

Preparation and Communication the Key for Children Home Alone

One of the realities of today's society is the pressure for children to stay home alone for a short time after school until a parent returns from work. But according to Canada Safety Council president Emile Therien, parents who let their children stay home on their own or with a sibling must supervise them remotely. "Whether they are 6 or 16, school age children need to be supervised by a responsible adult," he advises. "If you can't be there in person when your child gets home from school, find a way to give him or her the feeling of being supervised."

The Canada Safety Council's advice includes:

- Set firm rules, with clear do's and don'ts.
- Prepare your child to deal with situations that may arise.
- Specify how his or her time is to be spent
- Keep in touch – if you're hard to reach, get a mobile phone or pager.
- Make sure your home is safe and secure
- Limit the time you leave your child at home alone.

The age at which children can legally be left at home alone for short periods of time varies from province to province, from 10 to 12 years. However, a 1999 report commissioned by Health Canada found, that parents request "home alone" courses for children as young as grade three.

Therien urges parents not to consider letting a child stay at home

alone before age 10 – and then only if the child is mature enough, only for an hour or two at most, and only if there's a responsible adult nearby to help out if needed. He says age alone does not determine whether or not a child is capable of looking after himself or herself properly. For example, unsupervised teens and pre-teens can sometimes get into more trouble than younger children. Short test runs may help you assess whether your child is ready to stay home alone. Go out for just a few minutes. When you return, talk to your child about the experience. Increase the amount of time you are out, leaving specific instructions to follow. After a few trials answer these questions:

- Does the child feel comfortable about being on his or her own?
- Do you feel comfortable about the child being at home alone?
- Can the child follow rules responsibly?
- Does the he/she understand and remember instructions, whether written or oral?
- Does the child find constructive things to do without getting into mischief?
- Can the child handle normal and unexpected situations?
- Are you able to communicate readily with him or her when you are not at home?
- Can the child always reach someone to help in case of emergency?

Reprinted with permission from Child Find Saskatchewan Newsmagazine Spring 2006