



Latch Key Kids

The need to leave a child alone after school is an issue for many working parents. And while there are no easy ways to reduce the anxiety associated with raising "latchkey kids," there are many ways we can reduce the risks.

Before you leave your child home alone, remember it is illegal if the child is under 10 years (12 in some provinces), but even at that age it doesn't necessarily mean a child is ready. Emotional development varies and your child's readiness should be paramount in your decision. Start by establishing house rules and emergency preparedness, then execute a few trial runs. Leave for only an hour at first, increasing the time with each test, and leave specific instructions to be followed such as which snacks can be eaten. After each trial ask these questions:

- > Did you and your child feel comfortable about his/her being alone?
- > Could you rely on your child to follow your rules responsibly?
- > Did s/he understand and remember instructions?
- > Did your child find constructive things to do, or get into mischief?
- > Was your child able to reach you?
- > Was your child able to handle an unexpected situation?
- > Was there another adult nearby to assist in an emergency?

You can also test your child's readiness by role-playing as a delivery person, a burglar, or a telephone caller. Role-play emergencies such as a fire in the microwave. How your child responds will determine what potential dangers still need to be addressed.

Keep in mind children often come under peer pressure to violate rules--especially during their teens. Remaining aware of your child's activities, keeping the lines of communication open, and adjusting the rules on an as-needed basis will help keep your child safe while encouraging independence.

Safety Tips For Leaving Children Unattended

- > Agree on the safest route home from school and instruct children never to deviate from this route. Teach stranger awareness and check for Block Parents, businesses, or telephone booths from where an emergency call can be placed. Once home, children should call a parent to check in. Parents whose jobs take them on the road should invest in a cell phone or pager.
- > Ask a neighbour to act as your back-up and introduce them to your children so they will not feel shy to ask for help. If a neighbour is not available, decide upon the next safest place such as a local business where your children should go to contact you.
- > Practice home safety skills such as keeping all doors and windows locked, emergency exits in case of fire, how to use the 911 system, and where to wait for emergency personnel. Keep a first aid kit in an accessible place and teach children how to handle incidents such as an accidental poisoning, a cut, or a burn. Have a flashlight handy in case of a power outage.



- > Keep all poisons, matches, firearms, alcohol, and medications under lock and key and teach children the dangers inherent in these items.
- > Instruct children which appliances they may use, and teach proper usage. In case of a severe storm, insist children stay away from all electrical appliances and to limit telephone use to emergencies or to establish contact with a parent.
- > Teach children never to tell anyone, even other children, that they are home alone, and practice neutral responses such as "My Mom can't come to the phone right now; can I take a message?" for telephone inquiries. Children should never let anyone into the house no matter what the story; if there are exceptions to this rule such as close friends or family, a list should be kept by the door for easy reference.
- > Teach children never to give out personal information over the telephone or Internet or to anyone who calls at the door. Should inquirers become insistent or abusive, children should call police.
- > Have an entrance light on a timer so your children don't have to enter a darkened home. Forbid entry if a door is open or a window broken, if there is smoke inside, or if the light isn't on.
- > Attach the house key to their person with a neck chain or wrist bracelet, and keep a spare with a neighbour. Or consider a keyless system such as Weiser's [Powerbolt Keyless Access System](#). With the Powerbolt the key is replaced by an entry code, solving at least one problem for all those kids who keep losing their keys, their mittens, schoolbooks, lunch money, homework....

