

TODAY, even in two-parent families, both parents often work. As a result, many children routinely spend time at home without adult supervision. Moreover, single parents have long faced the challenge of working *and* caring for young children alone.

Easy answers don't exist. After-school daycare is hard to find. (It's almost *impossible* to find in most rural areas.) When it is available, it is very expensive. This means that most of us really have no alternative but to be away from our children at times when they might need us.

Some reports refer to children's "self-care." This term interprets parents' necessary absence from the home (at work) as a choice. Obviously, it usually isn't a choice, and self-care is sometimes not a good alternative.

On the other hand, many, if not most, children 11 or older can manage after school. If the areas in which they live are not dangerous, and if parents make plans, "self-care" can be a good experience. Children can, if protected by a set of ground rules, learn to be responsible for themselves.

Maybe the real question is "When is being home alone acceptable?" Things to consider include:

- Is your neighborhood safe?
- Will a neighbor help in an emergency?
- Can your children get in touch with you when they need you?

Are the Children Home Alone? (Don't Worry, Be Savvy!)



- Do you need the cooperation of your employer? What for?
- What ground rules do your children need to follow when home alone?

Depending on your situation and what your children are like, ground rules will vary. The idea is that parent and child understand what to expect, how to deal with the expected, and what to do when the *unexpected* comes up.

In general, though, consider making rules for:

- visits from friends,
- use of the television,
- completion of homework,
- answering the door or phone,
- going outside,
- using appliances, and
- dealing with squabbles among brothers and sisters.

Rules can't cover every situation, and that's why it's important that children know how to contact you at work.

For more information, call the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (ERIC/CRESS) toll-free at 1-800/624-9120. We can help direct you to other resources. To find out more about the ERIC system and its varied units and services, call ACCESS ERIC at 1-800/USE-ERIC. Staff of ERIC/CRESS prepared this article, based on information in the ERIC database.