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KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE
TOGETHER FOR 12 YEARS

Home or Out Alone

A guide to help you decide
if your child is ready to stay
home or go out alone.

Home or Out Alone

As your child gets older, it's likely they'll want a bit more independence. Staying home or going out without you is a natural step for them to take — when the time is right.

It can be hard to decide whether your child is ready. There's a lot to think about. And a lot you might be worried about. This guide is designed to reduce that worry, by helping you make the right decision for you and your child.





**Every family is different, so
make this guide your own**

You can make notes on it,
customise it, pick and choose
the bits that are relevant –
whatever works for you!

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Are they ready or not?

Things to know before you decide

There's no legal age limit for a child to stay home or go out alone, but it's against the law to leave a child alone if it puts them at risk.*

Every child is different, so it's up to you to decide whether they're ready. But there are a few key things to know, that should help you make your decision.

Things to know before they stay or go:

The first thing you might think about is their age and maturity.

- **Do you think they're old enough?**
- **How long could they cope on their own?**
Remember, for a younger child half an hour can feel like a long time.
- **Can they deal with risks?**
- **Will they behave responsibly?**
- **Will they be safe?**
- **Perhaps most importantly, how does your child feel about this idea?**

Some children like to take every opportunity to show they can be grown up, they might be really keen to be left 'in charge'.

Others will feel nervous about the responsibility.

*Parents can be prosecuted if they leave a child unsupervised 'in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to health': [gov.uk/law-on-leaving-your-child-home-alone](https://www.gov.uk/law-on-leaving-your-child-home-alone)

Things to know before they stay home alone:

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- **A baby or young child should never be left alone, not even for a few minutes — whether they're asleep or awake**

Most accidents happen at home, and children under five are most at risk of getting hurt.

- **Is your home safe for them?**

Check that the fire alarms, locks and windows are working, leave a spare set of keys out and make sure they can get food or use the bathroom if they need to.

Consider if there's anything that could hurt them and how you could reduce that risk, eg by putting sharp objects, alcohol and medicine out of reach or view.

- **Can they contact you? Or someone else?**

Make sure they have your number and have access to a phone, so they can call you if they need you. Keep your phone on you, on loud if possible.

Also leave a list of other trusted adults to call: neighbours, relatives or family friends who live nearby. And, just in case, remind them to call 999 if there's an emergency.

Things to know before they go out alone:

- **Where do they want to go?**
- **What do they want to do?**
- **Who will they be with?**
- **How far will they travel?**
There's a big difference between walking to the corner shop and going into town, for example.
- **What time will they be out?**
Consider if it's safe for them to be out late, or after dark.

The next section will help you cover these questions with them.





Will they be safe and sound?

A checklist to help you keep them safe when you're not around

Here are some useful tips to help you prepare your child for being alone, whether they're out or at home. Go through the list with your child, treating each checked off item as another step towards them being safe and sound when you're not around.

Need to knows

There are a few basic things your child should know before they can stay home or go out alone.

For staying home

- ☒ Their parent or carer's number
- ☐ Another trusted adult's number
- ☐ A trusted adult they could go to in person, in an emergency

For going out

- ☐ Their full name
- ☐ Their address
- ☐ Two trusted adults' phone numbers (include the home number, if you have one)
- ☐ How to cross roads safely

What ifs

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Talk to your child early on about scenarios they might face and how to stay safe. Ask them what they'd do and how they feel about them. Doing this will give you both peace of mind.

When they're home alone, what if...

- ☐ They're hungry and want some food?
- ☐ There's a power cut?
- ☐ They smell gas?
- ☐ A broken tap floods the bathroom?
- ☐ There's a fire?
- ☐ A stranger knocks at the door?
- ☐ You're out for longer than you thought?
- ☐ They hurt themselves?

When they're out alone, what if...

- ☐ A stranger tries to talk to them, or take them somewhere?
- ☐ Someone they know tries to take them somewhere, without asking you?
- ☐ Someone bullies them?
- ☐ Someone offers them alcohol or drugs?
- ☐ Someone asks them to do something they're not comfortable with?
- ☐ They're stopped by the police?
- ☐ Their phone battery dies? (if they have one)
- ☐ They get hurt?



Boundaries

Setting clear boundaries will help you and your child know how they should behave when you're not around. It's a good idea to agree on some house or outside rules that suit their maturity before you leave them alone. You could even write up an agreed list.

House rules

Ask yourself questions like:

- ☐ Who can they have over, if anyone?
- ☐ What devices or online apps, games and sites can they use? And who is it ok to talk to online?
- ☐ How long can they spend on them?
- ☐ What can they do in the kitchen?
- ☐ Where in the house can they go?
- ☐ Who can they tell that they'll be home alone?
- ☐ Can they leave the house?

Outside rules

Ask yourself questions like:

- ☐ How far from home can they go?
- ☐ How long can they stay out?
- ☐ Who can they go out with or meet?
- ☐ When is their agreed home time?
- ☐ What activities are ok for them to do?

Trial runs

If you think they might be ready, but still aren't sure, why not do a trial run?

Trialling staying home

Go out for a few minutes and see how they cope. Then gradually build up the length of time you leave them alone for.

Trialling going out

Let them take the lead when you're out together. Only correct them if they do something that puts them at risk.



Building trust

Give your child a chance to build their independence by building your trust. If they keep to rules and boundaries you set, you'll feel more confident letting them do more on their own. So, why not turn these checklist items into chances for them to be rewarded? A scale they can climb to reach even more independence. Something like:

Building trust at home

- ☐ **Has my child answered our 'what ifs' well?**
Trial them spending time alone for a short period.
- ☐ **Have they spent the agreed amount of time alone ok?**
Increase the time they're allowed to spend alone.
- ☐ **Have they kept to our house rules?**
Give them more freedom by tweaking one of the rules.

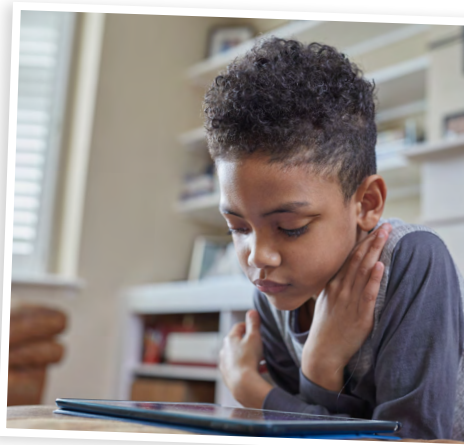
Building trust outside

- ☐ **Has my child passed their trial run?**
Let them spend time alone for real next.
- ☐ **Have they kept to our outside rules?**
Give them more freedom by tweaking one of the rules.
- ☐ **Have they kept to the agreed home time?**
Make their home time a bit later.

Pandering to pressure

Pester power is strong, we know. Your child might insist that they'll be ok on their own, giving all sorts of reasons why they're ready to be alone. But if you're not sure, if there's a niggles of doubt, don't block it out. Trust your instincts. You need to be sure they'll be safe when you're not around.

- ☐ **Do I, as their parent or carer, feel they're ready to stay home alone?**
- ☐ **Do I, as their parent or carer, feel they're ready to go out alone?**



**Making sure
they're happy too**

Just as you need to be sure, so do they. If your child is worried about the prospect of being alone, talk this through with them. Asking them these questions is a good place to start:

- **Is there anything that worries you about being left alone?**

Example prompts could be:

- *Being left alone for longer than agreed*
- *Not being able to get in touch with you*
- *Someone coming to the door*
- *There being an emergency*

- **Why is it making you worried?**

- **What would help you feel less worried?**

- **Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?**



Extra needs

There may be a few more things that you and your child need to check off before they're ready to be left alone.

Use this space to add anything we haven't covered to your safe and sound checklist:

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If not you, then who?

Clubs, childcare and leaving them under other supervision

If you're not sure your child is ready to be left alone, a stepping stone may be leaving them under another trusted adult's supervision.

Home, but not alone

If your child isn't ready to stay home alone but you need to go out without them, you'll need some form of childcare. Choosing the right kind will depend on your child's age and what you both feel comfortable with.

Some options:

Family and friends who you trust

Grandparents who live nearby or other parents — could you set up a childcare swap with them?

A babysitting circle

Join a circle near you or set one up with neighbours and/or parents you know.

Older siblings

Make sure they're comfortable and able to look after younger siblings — especially if they're looking after more than one.

Nurseries

They usually look after children up to school age.

Childminders

They take care of children of a range of ages in their own home.

You'll find registered childminders on these sites:

England and Wales
gov.uk/find-registered-childminder

Scotland
childminding.org

Northern Ireland
nicma.org

Babysitting agencies

These are good for occasional help. They have to do background checks on any babysitters on their books, so you'll know your child is safe with them.

Independent babysitters

They may not have been through checks, so it's worth meeting them to find out about their experience, ask any niggling questions and perhaps even introduce them to your child. If it doubt, don't hire them.

For more help deciding whether to use a babysitter or childminder, visit
nspcc.org.uk/childcare

If you have a child between two and four, you may be able to get free childcare from the government:
gov.uk/freechildcare

Out, but not alone

If your child isn't ready to go out alone, there are other ways to give them a little independence, while keeping your peace of mind. Things like:

- **After school or breakfast clubs**
- **Sports clubs**
- **Community centre groups**

If you don't know much about the club or their safety procedures and feel worried about leaving your child, start by asking yourself these questions:

Does the club seem welcoming to you as a parent?

Make sure they give you a point of contact to discuss any concerns.

Can they tell you how they keep children in their care safe?

You should have access to things like the club's child protection policy, staff code of conduct and recruitment procedures.

Are other parents you trust happy with the club?

Perhaps even check their children are happy too.

"When Tariq wanted to join the local football club, I met the coaches first to check it out."

Marlam

Mum to Tariq, 12

Can I talk

this through?

Extra support to help you decide, if you need or want it

Although it's ultimately up to you to decide if your child is ready to spend time alone, you're not alone in your decision.

We're here for you, every day of the year. If you have any questions or worries, feel free to get in touch with us, or find out more from these organisations.

Our trained helpline experts will help with worries or tough decisions you're facing about whether your child is ready.

If reading this guide has made you concerned about other children you know who stay home or go out alone, please get in touch with us.

Call **0808 800 5000**

Email **help@nspcc.org.uk**

Or talk to us online at **nspcc.org.uk/help**

More support services:

Family Lives

will help with all aspects of parenting and family life.

0808 800 2222

familylives.org.uk

Parentline Scotland

(Children 1st)

0800 028 2233

children1st.org.uk

Parenting Across Scotland

parentingacrossscotland.org

Parenting NI

(Northern Ireland)

0808 8020 400

ci-ni.org.uk/parentline-ni

Family Information

Services Wales

has guidance on childcare, and children's and young people's services.

fis.wales

Child Protection in Sport Unit

has useful information on keeping children safe in sport.

the cpsu.org.uk

Child Accident Prevention Trust

has lots of guidance on preventing accidents.

capt.org.uk





Together we can help children who've been abused to rebuild their lives. Together we can protect children at risk. And, together, we can find the best ways of preventing child abuse from ever happening.

We change the law. We visit schools across the country, helping children understand what abuse is. And, through our Childline service, we give young people a voice when no one else will listen.

But all this is only possible with your support. Every pound you raise, every petition you sign, every minute of your time, will help make sure we can fight for every childhood.

nspcc.org.uk

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

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