

## Is Self-Care Right for Your Family?

The term self-care is sometimes used to describe children of upper elementary and middle-school age who are responsible for their own safety and well-being when outside of the school or other direct, adult supervision. This can also include children who are in the care of another child under the age of 14 years. The appropriateness of self-care varies from child to child. Age, maturity, attitude, safety of the home and neighborhood, and the structure of self-care all influence the effects on your child.

First, be sure the child welfare guidelines of your state or county allow for self-care by contacting your local Child Protective Services agency. You will find that most counties recommend time limits for leaving children of specific ages home alone.

You, as a parent, play a major role in making it a success by your attitude and how well you communicate with your child. Do you

- Have a positive attitude about going to work?
- Have open lines of communication?
- Have a psychologically close and trusting relationship?

### **Are you ready for self-care?**

Before choosing self-care, consider other solutions. Possible options may include:

- Staying with another member of the family
- Using part-time child care
- Participating in summer programs
- Hiring a college student to care for your child
- Trading care with friends and neighbors

Making the conscious decision to use self-care—rather than "letting" it happen or being talked into it by your child—will help set the groundwork for a more successful experience. Both you and your child must first be ready for self-care. Keep in mind that your child will respond to your emotions about self-care, whether you are confident or fearful. First ask yourself,

- Am I comfortable leaving my child alone?
- Do I have concerns about safety?
- Do I have concerns about the readiness of my child?
- Do I have concerns about being overprotective?

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You know your environment and your child best. Trust your instincts. Only you can decide what is best for your child.

### **Is your child ready for self-care?**

First, consult your county social service agency or local police department for information on your community's local guidelines. If you meet the guidelines, there are then signs of readiness that you need to consider.

Look at your child's ability for self-care through the following several factors:

#### **1. Physical Maturity**

- Can your child care for a pet if needed?
- Can your child get ready for school without supervision?

#### **2. Cognitive Maturity**

- Can your child answer the phone in a way that does not indicate that they are home alone?
- Does your child know to look before answering the front door? Under what circumstances is it safe to open the door?
- Can your child understand your written directions and follow them accordingly?
- Does your child have an accurate concept of time to schedule activities throughout the day?
- Do they use safe judgment when faced with a problem-solving situation?
- Can your child understand an emergency and when help is needed?

#### **3. Emotional Maturity**

- Is your child confident?
- Does your child have a lot of fears?
- Is your child stressed in uncomfortable or new situations?
- Is your child capable of solving problems that might arise during the day?
- Is your child able to remain calm and handle fear, loneliness, and boredom?

#### **4. Social Maturity**

- Does your child solve sibling conflicts with little help from adults?
- Does your child talk easily to you about events and feelings?
- Is your child confident in contacting an adult if there is a problem?
- Does your child choose friends that influence positive behaviors?

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No matter what your child's age or ability, it is important for everyone to feel confident with the self-care decision. You may want to test your child's skills in the above areas by asking questions and during roll play with your family. Have an adult friend that your child won't recognize call or stop by the house. Observe the reaction from your child. What information does your child give out? Does your child make it obvious that he or she is home alone? Talking about the appropriate responses is the best way for your child to learn what will be expected of him or her.

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