On My Own and OK

A guide for parents with school-age children who are home alone
Most parents are careful to keep the information quiet about their children being on their own, and this can help protect children. If the child carries a house key, it's a good idea to teach the child to keep it out of sight to avoid advertising to strangers that the child is on his or her own.

Children experience being on their own many different ways. Some children are able to assume responsibilities, handle problems, and acquire skills in caring for themselves and others. Others experience fears that cause them great distress. However, they often don't communicate these fears to parents because they don't want to add to their parents' worries. Sometimes there are no open channels of communication where children can really talk through feelings, problems, and the overall situation.

Studies indicate that the fears children on their own experience and the concerns parents have are often very similar. There can be some real risks for children on their own, the results can be positive for the whole family.

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<td>Children “on their own” are school-age children who are regularly left to supervise themselves during some part of the day, usually before and/or after school. These children are sometimes referred to as latchkey children. Children are left on their own in families of all income levels; not only in big cities but in towns, on farms, and everywhere.</td>
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<td>Parents leave children on their own for a variety of reasons, including unavailability of day-care programs for school-age children, cost of care, and pressures from children who feel they're too old to go to a sitter. While most parents would not leave their children on their own if they had the choice, some parents find there are some benefits for the family. Children on their own can help around the house and don't require elaborate arrangements for transportation. Parents feel less pressure about unexpected delays at work and having to meet child-care deadlines. Some parents feel guilty about leaving their children alone; others feel more comfortable.</td>
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When is a child ready?

There is no single answer to this question, no magical age or single indicator that ensures that children are ready. You, as parents, know how your child handles responsibility, follows directions, uses good judgment, and feels about being home alone. Answering the “Parent checklist: Is my child ready?” questions may help you not only determine readiness, but also point out some of the areas where the child may not be mature enough. You may need to consider other options.

If you are considering leaving your child on his or her own on a regular, full-time basis, it may be helpful to have some trial runs first. One way to do this is to leave the child alone for a specified period of time while you are shopping or visiting a neighbor. Follow up the experience with a discussion with the child about how it felt, listening carefully for reactions. If this works well, continue the procedure with a few variations. Increase the amount of time you’re gone and leave some specific directions to be followed. After each experience, sit and talk with the child about how the experience was and how the child felt. If problems exist with fears or inability and unwillingness to assume responsibilities, the child may not be ready for being on his or her own. If the signs indicate that the child can handle the responsibility, keep channels of communication open to discuss whatever comes up.

Parent checklist: Is my child ready?

1. Do you feel your child is mature enough to handle the responsibilities of being on his or her own?

2. Do you and your child communicate well about feelings?

3. Have you explained to the child your reasons for leaving him or her on his or her own?

4. Has your child indicated interest and/or willingness to stay on his or her own?

5. Does your child generally observe rules that exist in the home?

6. Does your child tend to be fearful, e.g., is afraid of dark, has nightmares, fears new situations?

7. Does your child show resourcefulness by usually being able to find something useful and interesting to do?

8. Does your child get along with younger/older sisters/brothers?

9. To what extent does your child: (circle appropriate number)

   a. complete household chores
   b. complete homework
   c. arrive at school on time
   d. arrive home from school on time
   e. let you know where he or she is going before leaving
   f. ask for help appropriately when problems arise
   g. tell you about daily events

   HARDLY EVER   SOMETIMES   OFTEN   MOST OF THE TIME   ALWAYS

   1  2  3  4  5

   1  2  3  4  5

   1  2  3  4  5

   1  2  3  4  5

   1  2  3  4  5

   1  2  3  4  5
Fears

When children are on their own, it is not unusual for both children and parents to experience fears. Most children are occasionally afraid, whether adults are around or not. Children on their own are likely to feel fear more frequently and for longer periods of time. Many children develop their own strategies for getting rid of fear or coping with it until parents come home.

In one study, researchers found that about one third of children on their own experience fears that recur. They develop strategies for defending themselves rather than for allaying the fears. For instance, Roger, age 10, hears sounds in the basement several times a week. His strategy is to turn the television up very loud when he gets home so he won't hear noises.

Twice as many school-age children home alone have fears that continue or are repetitive as do children who are home with sisters or brothers. Companionship provides some sense of safety.

Other strategies that children on their own use to cope with fears include:
• hiding in places they feel are safe, for example, bathrooms, under beds, in closets
• turning on the television as soon as they arrive home to drown out scary noises or to alert possible intruders that someone is home
• turning on all the lights in the house
• conducting routine security checks of doors, windows, closets, under beds
• using the phone: calling parents when something especially frightening happens or to settle squabbles with sisters or brothers, and older children spending long hours on the phone for comfort and companionship

It is not unusual for children to keep fears to themselves. Some children feel that if they express their fears their parents will get someone to babysit them and they will lose face. Other children do not want to add their fears on to what they see as the already heavy burdens their parents carry. But, keeping fears in is not good. It is important to help children express their feelings and develop strategies for dealing with them. For parents, it may mean sharing their own feelings that may be painful or may not come easily. It can be helpful to remember that open communication can help relationships overall and can make the experience less troublesome for both parents and children.

Determine your child’s fears

Keep communication lines open.

Provide opportunities for you and your child to talk. Convince the child that you want to know the truth. This may mean recognizing some of your own ambivalent or guilt feelings.

Ask specific questions. For instance, “Do you have a special hiding place? Do you ever play in the closet? When you come home do you check the doors?”

A very elaborate plan for self-protection may indicate that the child is feeling threatened and very afraid.

Recurring nightmares or sleep disturbances, especially if persistent and overwhelming, may indicate excessive fears. Be aware of changes in children’s moods. Depression may indicate a fear of being alone or feeling helpless or unloved. Children may be sad and uninterested in activities. Some may exhibit very aggressive behaviors. Other indicators may be overeating, complaints of boredom, fatigue, and sleeping after school.

Take some time with your child to discuss feelings. You and your children should each complete the “feelings” worksheets provided. Then sit together and share your responses. (If your child is taking or has taken the On My Own and OK program, you both may already be familiar with this activity. It would still be interesting to do this activity again, to see how your feelings have changed from when you first did it.)
Communication lines

When parents are working and children are at school and on their own, families may not spend much time together. Sometimes children say they don’t see much of their parents and don’t feel as close to them as they do to their friends. Some children on their own don’t express their problems and feelings to anyone. Reasons can be very complicated. It can be helpful to remember that children want to please their parents. Parents encourage and reward children for being mature and responsible on their own. In most cases, children who won’t talk to their parents about their problems won’t talk to other adults either.

How parents express concern
If parents feel positive about the experience, their children are more likely to feel positive.

On the other hand, parents who express excessive concerns can also inhibit their children from expressing their own feelings. How parents express directions can be very important, e.g., curt, short directions like, “Be sure the door is locked,” or “Don’t open the door for anyone,” are intended to protect the child but they also give strong messages about danger. They tell the child that staying home alone is unsafe. Rules and directions given in this way without explanation can instill fears.

Parents who frequently say things like “Are you sure you’ll be okay all by yourself?” and “I worry about you,” can also intensify fear. If parents express worry to children in this way, children may reason that they are not safe.

Suggestions for parents
- Encourage communication by providing a time and place for discussion. This can be on a one-to-one basis with parent and child, or it can take the form of scheduling family meetings to provide opportunities for the family to express concerns and clarify policies and procedures. Providing regular opportunities rather than crisis meetings can help keep communication flowing smoothly.
- Communicate affection and love often. Let children know that you really care. It doesn’t take much time to give a light pat, a quick hair rumple, a big hug or say, “Hi! I’m really glad to see you, I missed you.”
- Be dependable. If you say you’ll be home at 5:30 and don’t arrive until 6:45, your child may interpret that as meaning that you care more for work than for the child. Also, many children experience great stress when parents are late. Call when this happens.
- Children usually are most eager to talk about their day right after school when you’re not there. When they get home from school, they can write down all the important things that happened in a notebook or on a chalkboard. To get the child started, you may want to use a worksheet like “This is What Happened Today.” If a tape recorder is available, try teaching children to use the recorder and have them tape comments about their day.
- After you arrive home, set aside some special time for you and the child to go over the day’s experiences.
- Sometimes an activity that you and your child share can open communication channels. One useful method might be sharing information about each other in a special way. An activity called “Some Things I Want You to Know About Me” may be useful and interesting. If each of you completes your page and sits and shares it, you may open a new communication channel and share some good talk.
- Involve the children in decisions and discussions that affect them. They need to feel like they are contributing members of a family—not a burden.
- Be a good listener and spend some time with each child. Find a time and place without distractions. Accept what the child says. If a child tells you that he or she is afraid during an electrical storm, don’t respond by saying, “there’s nothing to be afraid of.” Instead, try to express in your own words what the child is feeling. For example, “It really frightens you to be home alone during a storm, doesn’t it? Let’s try . . .”
- Encourage children to express a problem clearly and directly.
- Encourage children to express feelings using statements like: “I feel . . .”
- Explain to the child the reasons for leaving him or her alone. Include the reasons why you are working and why other arrangements are not possible or desirable or feasible. This can keep children from concluding that you are working to avoid being with the child.
- When possible, a visit to the parents’ workplace can help children visualize where their parents are and convey a sense of travel time. This helps the child understand why parents can’t be home immediately.
Safety skills

Personal safety skills will help children protect themselves as well as reduce fears when they’re on their own. Teach them this information gradually rather than all at once. Too much information at one time is difficult to remember. Present your children with a number of situations and have them act out their responses. Simply telling them the information is rarely effective. It is quickly forgotten.

The telephone

The telephone is the life line between parent and child. If your work situation permits, have your child call when he or she arrives home from school. A call from parents once or twice daily can provide a feeling of security.

A list of emergency numbers should be posted by the phone and children should be taught how to use them and what to say. The emergency response telephone number 911 is being used in many communities. If your home is served by 911, take time to tell your child how and when to use it. Remember, it’s a good idea to practice making these calls.

The phone can also provide a child with companionship. Some children on their own will hold long conversations daily with friends who are also on their own at home. If this is a matter of concern to you because you cannot get through when your try to reach your child, establishing some rules will help. One way is to set a maximum time per call, e.g., 10-minute maximum with a 15-minute minimum interval between calls. Have a kitchen timer available near the phone for this purpose. Or, make a rule that the phone must be clear for five minutes beginning every quarter hour. Another strategy is to establish set times when the child cannot be on the phone, for example, 3:45 to 4:15. This enables you to contact the child during that time.

A major concern of parents with children on their own is keeping outsiders from knowing that there is no adult in the home. Some families tell the children not to answer the phone at all, or not unless the “special ring” or “magic code” is used. A special ring or a magic code is a certain number or a combination of rings that the child identifies and knows that he or she can answer.

In some families, children on their own answer all calls. Directions like the following can be given to the child and practiced.

- Answer the phone pleasantly. Do not give your name.
- Never tell a caller that you are home alone.
- Tell the caller that your parent can’t come to the phone right now.
- Take a message. Get the name and phone number of caller.
- If a message seems like it is very important and cannot wait until a parent comes home, call the parent at work.
- Do not give anyone your parent’s phone number at work.
- If the same person calls more than once and you do not know the person, call your parent or contact person.
- If someone calls with a prank call—for example, tries to play a joke, teases, threatens to hurt you, or scares you—hang up immediately and call your parent. Don’t answer the phone or door until a parent or your contact person gets home.

When the doorbell rings

In some families the rule is not to answer the door. In other families children answer the door with the following safety rules:

- Be sure the door(s) is always locked.
- Look through the window or peep-hole to see who is there.
- Talk through the door to find out who it is and what they want. Do not open the door.
- Do not be fooled by a request to use the bathroom or telephone. Say it is not possible and direct the person to the nearest public facility.
- Never let anyone in unless you have been told to expect them, even if it is someone you know.
- If someone says he or she is making a delivery or coming to repair something and you were not expecting anyone, do not let them in.
- If the person is someone you know and/or if the person says your parents asked him or her to stop by, call your parents and check.
- If you are expecting a delivery or repair person, have him or her slip an identification card under the door.
- If someone continues knocking, call a neighbor or the police for help.
- Don’t be embarrassed when you don’t let people in!

Remember, if the above directions don’t fit your family situation, create some that do and write them out for your child to follow.

Appliances

Problems with using or abusing appliances can be avoided if parents and children together identify those appliances that may be used and those that may not be used. It might be helpful to have stickers that say “do not use” on each appliance that is not for childrens’ use. A list posted on the refrigerator door may be another way. Some appliances that parents may not want their children to use include irons, food processors, power tools, stoves. Be sure that children know how to properly operate the appliances they are permitted to use.
Crisis and emergency situations

A crisis is anything that upsets someone. We can help children on their own to distinguish between small crises and emergency situations.

Examples of small crises

**LOCKED OUT**

Knowing that this can happen to all of us, it's best for parents and children to plan for it. Arrange to leave a key with a contact person if there is one who lives close by and is usually home. Or hide a key in a special hiding place that is out of sight and accessible. A last resort may be to be sure the child always has a quarter to call a parent from a pay phone.

**BLACKOUT**

Planning ahead for a blackout involves keeping a flashlight or two in handy places to be used in emergencies only and not for play. Show the child where the circuit breaker box or fuse box is located and how to reset the box if the circuit is tripped or a fuse is blown. It is a good idea to have each breaker or fuse clearly labeled.

Discuss in advance with the child what to do if the blackout is beyond the child's control. Maybe the first plan is to call a contact person or parent. Perhaps have a list of "things you can do in a blackout" near the "flashlight place." List a few items that can run on batteries, such as radio, clock, electronic games. The location of additional flashlights or battery-powered lamps can be very useful and help "light" a gloomy situation.

**PLUMBING**

In the event of a leaking pipe, prepare your child by showing him or her where the shut-off valves for each sink and toilet are and how and when to turn them off. If a pipe is leaking badly or bursts, be sure the child knows who to call (contact person or parent).

**BROKEN GLASS**

If a glass or a plate is dropped and shatters, first tell the child to check for cuts and take care of them. If your child is barefoot, be sure he or she puts shoes on. Show child how to sweep broken glass into a dustpan and not to pick slivers up by hand. One effective strategy is to cover the area with a cloth or newspaper to mark it off limits to everyone until parents get home.

Examples of emergency situations

**HOME FIRES**

Children on their own should be taught fire prevention and self-prevention techniques.

- Show your children where the smoke detectors are in your house and let them hear what one sounds like when it goes off.
- Prepare a diagram of your house with escape routes from each room drawn in.
- Practice fire drills.
- Practice leaving a smoky room by crawling on hands and knees to the nearest exit.
- Practice what to do if your clothes catch on fire. *Stop, drop, and roll:* Drop to the ground or floor and roll until the fire is out.

It is essential that children understand that the most important thing for them to do is to get out of the house. They should not try to put out a small fire or go back into the house to get anything. They can call the fire department from a neighbor's house.

**SEVERE WEATHER/TORNADOES**

Consider preparing a severe weather kit with your child and keeping it in a designated place. Some items for the kit might be:

- a portable radio with weather band
- flashlight, extra batteries
- two-days' supply of food that needs no cooking or refrigeration
- clean plastic container for water
- small first aid kit
- diagram of where to go if there is a tornado warning

Teach your children how to use radio announcements: a *watch* means to be on the alert for more information and a *warning* means a tornado or severe storm has been sighted nearby and they should go to the designated safe place.
Children on their own should be taught some basic first aid. They also need to know how to recognize what is an emergency and what can be handled at home.

**First aid kit**
Assemble the kit with your child, explaining what each item is and how it should be used. Decide with your child on a safe, accessible place to keep it. Some suggested contents include:

- box of bandages of different sizes for small cuts and scrapes
- sterile gauze pads for larger cuts
- adhesive tape to hold sterile pads
- small scissors to cut tape
- tweezers to remove bee stings or slivers
- calamine lotion to treat insect bites
- peroxide to clean cuts
- cotton balls to use with peroxide to clean cuts
- thermometer to check for fever
- ice pack
- ipecac

**Cuts and scrapes**
These are an everyday occurrence for many children. Teach children how to wash out small cuts or scrapes with soap and water and how to place a bandage on, if needed.

If a cut is bleeding profusely, tell the child to apply direct pressure until bleeding stops, then clean it and bandage it. If blood is gushing and squirting and can’t be stopped, this is an emergency. Have the child call a parent and police or ambulance immediately.

**Burns**
The best treatment for minor burns is to run cold water on the burn or hold an ice cube on it until it no longer hurts. A cold pack in the freezer can be very helpful.

**Nosebleeds**
Nosebleeds can be very frightening to a child home alone so it’s important to teach children what to do.

- Sit up; don’t lie down.
- Pinch the nose between finger and thumb and apply pressure for about five minutes.
- If bleeding does not stop, apply cold cloth on the nose.
- If that doesn’t work, call for help.

**Poisoning**
The best treatment is prevention.

- Place poisonous substances out of the reach of children.
- Mark all poisonous substances clearly and explain symbols used.
- Keep the number of the poison control center on an emergency phone list near the telephone.

You may have a local Poison Control number listed on the inside front cover of your telephone directory.
Sibling care

When more than one child is home, the situation changes. Usually one child is responsible for the care of the other sisters and/or brothers. Some families consider this responsibility a regular part of the child's home activities. Other families arrange to pay the older child. Each family should decide what is best.

Brothers and sisters provide company for each other and having siblings in the house may reduce children's fears. One the other hand, the potential for squabbling, fighting, and arguing is the concern most often expressed by both parents and children.

The potential exists for some serious problems and being aware of them can help prevent them. In some families, fighting can become so intense that accidents and injuries result. If there are no plans for who is responsible for what, parents may be deluged with phone calls that are usually not welcome in the work place.

Sexual advances from older brothers to younger children have been reported in some families. Often the younger children have been threatened not to tell. Parents can be alert to physical symptoms of sexual abuse, including genital soreness or infection, and to behavioral symptoms that can be very diverse. Some behavioral symptoms include: children who seem unusually close; children who seem fearful of an older sibling; children who show aggressive behavior toward an older sibling; complaints of headaches, stomach aches, nightmares; changes in school performance. If parents suspect sexual abuse, they should talk to their children before reaching conclusions. Physical symptoms may be self-inflicted, behavioral symptoms may indicate fears or other stresses. If sexual abuse is confirmed, parents should obtain professional assistance.

Responsibility for siblings

When an older child is in charge of younger brothers or sisters, all children should be prepared. A child that is given responsibility for care of younger siblings should receive instructions in caring for younger children. Younger children should be prepared for being cared for by older siblings.

Conflicts about who's in charge

The easiest way to reduce conflicts between siblings is to reduce the amount of interaction between them. Siblings who are close in age can act independently of each other and no one has to be "in charge." The key to the house is often a symbol of power. With siblings close in age, consider giving each one his or her own key and recognize that each is responsible for himself or herself. Other conflicts can be reduced by establishing guidelines in advance, such as what chores each child is responsible for, what television programs may be watched, who sits where. Establishing rules together and having them written down can be very useful. Each child is directly responsible to the parents.

Older and younger siblings

In families where there is a substantial difference in ages of siblings, the oldest sibling is usually responsible, or in charge. In this situation, parents need to establish with the older sibling what he or she may or may not do and how to be loving, understanding, and helpful to younger siblings. Handling authority and dealing with misbehavior, discipline, and punishment are the areas where problems often arise. Again, by anticipating problems and establishing rules, parents can help reduce conflicts. Limiting the number of decisions the child in charge makes can help everyone. Planning in advance what snacks, chores, homework, and play activities children are to do after school will help avoid conflicts.

Parents can help older children understand that their responsibilities to younger children are not only as disciplinarian or rule enforcer, but as a caring nurturer. The child in charge monitors behavior, enforces the rules, and reports problems to parents when necessary.

Leisure time

Children on their own often have time that can be lonely or boring. But the time left after chores and homework are done can be productive for children as they learn to enjoy leisure time.

You can help children recognize that boredom is usually their choice, not a problem for someone else to solve for them. They can choose not to be bored and decide what to do. Parents can help children recognize and organize the possibilities, including categories like things to do outside and things to do inside; things to do alone and things to do with people.

Be clear about activities with people, such as who, when, where. Consider the possibility of phone pals—a friend to check homework with and talk to.

Help children develop some interests that can continue over time, like collections and genealogy.
Before school

In some families, parents have to leave home before children awake. In other families, children are awake when parents leave and have a considerable amount of time to be on their own before they leave for school. Parents should be aware of some of the risks of leaving their children alone in the morning. One of them is absenteeism.

It appears children left on their own in the morning have a higher rate of absenteeism than do other children. One problem is transportation. If a child misses the bus, he or she generally has no other way to get to school. Some of the reasons that children give are that they overslept, they couldn’t find homework, or they lost track of time. Another problem is that even if the child can get to school by bike or public transportation, he or she may not want to deal with the consequences of being late. For example, some schools do not admit late students without a note from parents. Being aware of some of these risks can help families plan.

Suggestions
• If possible, make sure the child wakes up on time. Prepare breakfast for the child, and lunch if required.
• If you must leave for work before your child gets up, be sure to arrange for the child to wake up on time. A phone call from work may be possible, if not, try an alarm clock.
• Children are more likely to eat breakfast if the table is set and breakfast is at least partially prepared. For example, cereal can be in a bowl, juice and milk in the refrigerator.
• Preparing for school the night before can make life much easier! Parent and child can select clothing, pack book bag, prepare lunch if needed, and arrange things in designated places to avoid panic in the morning.
• Preparing a list on a chalkboard or a special bulletin board in the kitchen or on the refrigerator door can help children remember what needs to be done. See the sample. Having something like this on a chalkboard or a write-on slate allows you to personalize it daily with specific items, and the date. It also encourages the child to read it when something new is there every day.

Good Morning!

1. When I left you were sleeping soundly and you smiled when I kissed you.
2. Breakfast is on the table. Glass of juice and milk for cereal are in refrigerator.
3. Remember to brush teeth, wash face and hands, and brush hair.
4. Your lunch ticket is in the pocket of your book bag.
5. The kitchen timer is set for 8:15. That’s when you leave.
6. Please check the door to see that it is locked.
7. Good luck with your science quiz. See you at 5:30.

Love,
Mom & Dad
After school

Parents can help children on their own after school to plan and organize what they can do, may do, and should do. The following are activities that most families should consider in helping children on their own. However, remember that school-agers enjoy having some free time to think, to ponder, to daydream and to “hang out.” You do not need to have every minute planned for them.

Television
Some families may want to discuss the use of the television—who chooses, what is permissible, and other concerns.

Homework
Some families reserve homework for the evening when parents are home and can help children with assignments. Other families expect children to do homework after school when they’re on their own. Keeping track of assignments completed and agreeing on a specified time period, for example 4:30 to 5:15, may help children stay with the task. Setting aside a special few minutes daily for parents and children to go over completed assignments together is helpful to everyone.

Chores
There are many ways to divide chores among family members and your family may have a system that works well. If not, your family may want to look for some systems that work well for you.

List all chores that need to be done daily and weekly. Have everybody participate in the list-making so that everyone understands what is needed.

Some parents assign chores on a weekly or monthly basis. This system works well for many families, especially if members can swap chores if they choose.

Rules at home

Rules play an important role for children on their own because the rules help anticipate problems and arrange for solutions in advance. Rules provide structure for children and can help them feel secure. Rules reflect parent(s’) expectations and define boundaries for safety. If children understand the reasons for the rules and participate in developing the rules, they are more likely to follow them.

Play privileges
Some families require children to stay in the house until a parent arrives home, and do not allow any friends in while parents are gone. Other families allow children to play outside under certain conditions: for example, chores and homework are done, children must let adult know, play with only certain friends. This should be discussed as a family and clear rules should be established. Some form of monitoring or checking needs to be built in. This may be done by phone or arrangements made with a neighbor or friend.

Guidelines for rules

• Try to have the child participate in creating the rules.
• State rules clearly, specifically, and in a positive manner. For instance, “The breakfast dishes should be done and the table set for dinner by 5:00 p.m.”
• If the rule involves a task, make it a necessary one and appropriate for the child. It may be unreasonable for a 9-year-old to prepare dinner but appropriate for him or her to set the table.
• Build in an enforceable consequence with the rule, such as, after your math homework is done you may watch television for a half-hour. When parents are not present to enforce the rules, enforcement should begin shortly after parents arrive home. Remember to check and enforce rules consistently.
• Remember that mistakes can happen. Firmness, patience, and flexibility will help you and the child.

Some topics where rules might help are: homework, chores, play privileges, care for siblings, snack preparation, and television watching. What are others for your family?
**Nutritious snacks**

For children on their own after school, helping them plan and organize for nutritious snacks can benefit the entire family by providing time together to make plans for the following day.

Planning after-school snacks to fit into the day’s meal pattern will help to ensure the children are eating nutritious snacks and will help avoid unpleasant problems of their eating off-limits snacks.

An evening planning session can also involve the child in preparing vegetables and nutritious dips so planned snacks are easily accessible. Also, children learn to use kitchen utensils and appliances by participating in the preparation.

**Be choosy about snacks**

Children have high energy needs because their bodies grow rapidly. But besides extra calories, snacks can also provide children with vitamins, minerals, and protein that may not be completely furnished in regular meals.

Choose snack foods that supply nutrients that have been found to be in low supply for some children. These nutrients include iron, vitamin A, and sometimes vitamin C. Snack foods high in iron include apricots, cherries, dried fruits, grapes, peanut butter, and enriched or whole-grain breads and cereals. Snack foods high in vitamin A include carrots, apricots, cantaloupe, fresh peaches, purple plums, and prunes. Snack foods high in vitamin C include cantaloupe, grapefruit, oranges, raspberries, strawberries, and citrus juices.

**Tips for snack choice**

- The food should look and taste good.
- Snacks should vary over a 1- or 2-week period.
- A wise choice of snack foods can play a major role in maintaining healthy teeth. The three main cavity-causing factors are the amount of sugar in the snack, the length of time the food stays in contact with the teeth, and the number of times a day sugary snacks are eaten.
- Choose snack foods that have not been salted, or present smaller amounts of salty snacks.

**Mom and Dad—are you good snacking models?**

Children model themselves after parents. You can increase the likelihood that your children will develop good snacking habits if appropriate foods are readily available in your kitchen: finger foods, fruits, vegetables, juices. You can also encourage friends, relatives, and associates to serve snacks that will provide nutrients needed for growth and good dental health.

**Economical snacks**

Some of the better snack choices can be the least expensive. However, preparation time may be longer, and these snacks may not be as readily accepted by children. You’ll need to balance cost, time, and acceptability.

An occasional extra treat such as the following adds variety and fun to snack time. (From *Snack Time for Kids*, Cooperative Extension Service, Manhattan, Kansas.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORANGE DELIGHT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 ounces concentrated orange juice</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1/3 cup)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup skim milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 tablespoons sugar or honey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 tablespoon vanilla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6 ice cubes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mix in blender until frothy (about 30 seconds)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PINEAPPLE CHUNKS, APPLE OR PEAR WEDGES</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• dip into sour cream or cheese spread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• dip into citrus juice and top with a sharp cheese spread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• dunk in cream cheese whipped with orange juice until fluffy</td>
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<tr>
<th>BANANA CHUNKS</th>
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<tr>
<td>• dip into citrus juice and roll in chopped nuts</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Examples of foods with many nutrients in addition to calories**

- enriched or whole grain breads
- crackers, nuts, seeds
- fresh fruits, some fruit juices
- raw vegetables
- meat, fish, poultry, eggs
- milk, cheese, ice cream, ice milk

**Foods with few nutrients besides calories**

- soft drinks, fruit-flavored drinks
- sweet rolls, doughnuts
- cakes, pies, pastry
- candy
- unenriched crackers, pretzels
Meal preparation

If children are expected to do advance preparation for dinner, assignments should be clearly stated. Discuss the plans the evening before: what preparations are needed and when they should be done. Jobs and recipes should be written in clearly stated sequence, then discussed with the children. Keep in mind the capabilities of the children. The following checklist may be useful.

Checklist

1. Is child interested in meal preparation? ___ ___

2. Does child know techniques involved in preparation? ___ ___

3. Does child understand time schedule needed? ___ ___

4. Can child understand how to use appliances and tools? ___ ___
   a. knife selection and use ___ ___
   b. oven ___ ___
   c. crock pot ___ ___
   d. range top ___ ___
   e. pan/baking dish selection ___ ___
   f. microwave oven ___ ___
Community support for school-age children

This publication and the On My Own and OK program are designed to help families with children who are on their own develop confidence and competence in being on their own. Until recently, latchkey children and the needs of families with all adults working have not been recognized as public issues. Increasingly, however, community leaders, legislators, professionals, and families are recognizing that working family needs are legitimate.

The following suggestions are ways that families and communities can organize and develop support and alternative programs for school-age children.

Community phone centers
Community phone centers provide a service that children can call to check in when they get home from school and to ask questions if they need help. One example is Phone Friend, an approach developed in a Pennsylvania community. It is a parent supplement listening service and has been very effective for school-age children. Using a hot-line number, Phone Friend gives referrals to community services but does not usually give counseling or follow up on a caller except in an emergency. Phone friend uses trained volunteers who provide an empathetic listening ear for children who might be scared, bored, or lonely. Chatters is another similar service used in California.

Information and referral services
Information and referral services provide referrals for parents to match their child-care needs with existing sources of child care. Many parents whose children are on their own would rather place their child in some kind of care, but they do not know of any available facilities. Information and referral services not only provide child-care information and help match parents and child-care facilities, but also become involved in increasing the supply of child care. Some use information for assessing unmet needs and become advocates for getting those needs met.

Child care for school-agers
A number of child-care programs that provide day-care service during the day for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers offer school-age programs before and/or after school. These may be located at the center or at another site such as a church.

School-based child-care programs use the school building to provide before-school and/or after-school care. These programs may be run by the school district or by a child-care center. These programs usually can pay for themselves at rates most parents can afford.

Many communities have a variety of after-school activities available to children: boys' club, girls' club, boy scouts, girl scouts, camp fire, 4-H, parks and recreation programs, and after-school athletic programs. Task forces or study committees could be set up in communities to help coordinate existing programs to better meet the needs of families with school-age children.

School-age children as community resources
Some school-age children, and families who are interested and feel their children are ready, could serve as useful resources within communities. Establishment of a volunteer program for some of these children might have them serving as aides in child-care facilities, libraries, parks, museums. Providing this type of experience for interested children would give them valuable work experience, and could fit as part of a package of child-care arrangements that families put together.