

Children left alone

"When mummy goes out, I lock the door from the inside... she calls in the letterbox to say goodbye, I leave the lights on in case anyone tries to get in. Mummy usually comes home in the night when I am asleep."

- Never leave a young child alone
- Children under 13 years should not be left
- Children are not ready for this amount of responsibility
- Leaving a child alone places them at risk of harm
- It can be a lonely and frightening experience
- Plan who you could contact for emergency care

Common sense and the law

If a child is not ready to be left alone it can be a sad, lonely, frightening and dangerous experience. There are many possible risks, both physical and emotional, which could affect your child in a negative way.

In addition, the level of responsibility which is given to the child to look after themselves to somehow manage whatever may happen is impossible for a younger child. They may say that they do not mind being left and may find it exciting initially, but they cannot fully know the possible risks and how to handle them.

Even the relatively ordinary things that happen in life, such as hunger, a storm, the phone ringing or someone coming to the front door can cause problems. An accident, feeling ill or a power cut may occur and these are not issues that a child could deal with.

Whatever kind of neighbourhood you live in, it is rarely, if ever, possible to leave your children and assume that someone will look out for them if necessary, as may be the case in some communities and cultures.

If they are alerted, the Police and/or Social Services may take action if they think that a child has been neglected by being left alone. Neglect happens when a parent or carer fails to meet children's basic needs of food, shelter, security, attention or protection from exposure to danger.

The NSPCC have issued guidelines advising that children under the age of 13 should not be left alone. While this recommendation does not have the force of law, it is suggested as good practice. Children under this age do not have the maturity to manage the responsibility of being left alone and this may be particularly so if they are physically or learning disabled.

As a young person reaches adolescence, leaving them alone after school, for an evening or during the day is less concerning as long as they are prepared and aware of what to do if they are worried or need anything.

So preparation for this is necessary. If your child is 13 or over and you feel he or she has the maturity and ability to deal with this, it is important that they know where you are and who to contact in an emergency.

WARNING SIGNS

Parents who have limited support. A child who is frequently observed outside and alone for extended periods of time. Childcare arrangements that keep going wrong.

ACTION

If there is immediate risk of harm to a child, call the police.

WHAT TO SAY

If you are worried about a child being left alone, talk to the parent, a health visitor, teacher or a social worker.

PREVENTION

Think about shared babysitting and discuss this with neighbours, friends or other parents you have contact with. Find out about After School Clubs and Holiday Play Schemes.

CONTACTS

- NSPCC
0808 800 5000
- Childline (for children)
0800 1111
- Ask Wiltshire
08457 585 072
- Wiltshire County Council
Children's Services:
Main Switchboard
01225 713000
Area Offices:
North Wiltshire
01249 444321
West Wiltshire
01225 773500
South Wiltshire
01722 327551
Emergency Duty Service
(out of hours)
0845 60 70 888
- Wiltshire Police Child
Protection Units
(central call handling)
01380 735 735

*Check the Wiltshire ACPC website for the latest phone numbers:
www.wiltshire.gov.uk*