



**Prevent Child Abuse**  
New Jersey

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# Press Release

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## WHEN IS IT OKAY TO LEAVE MY CHILD HOME ALONE?

*Millions of parents agonize over this question everyday!*

NEW BRUNSWICK - AUGUST 2, 2004 - As parents begin to think about their 'back to school' schedules they face dilemmas that could confound a logistics expert. One option that can save both time and money requires very serious thought.... when is a child old enough to come home alone after school?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau close to 7 million school-aged children per year are left home alone on a regular basis. Each year 4.5 million children ages 14 and under are reported injured in the home, mostly during the hours when they are out of school and left unsupervised. However, many children are able to manage safely and responsibly at home unsupervised when given realistic expectations and firm ground rules.

Deciding to leave a child alone is a very difficult choice for a parent to make. Most experts agree that age alone is not a determining factor in deciding whether or not to leave a child home alone.

Prevent Child Abuse - New Jersey (PCA-NJ) suggests that parents faced with this dilemma consider all options and avoid making premature decisions. There are many factors which must be considered during the decision making process, including the following:

**Know your local and state laws** - In New Jersey, abandonment and neglect laws do not set clear age limitations for leaving a child unsupervised at home. However, if that child becomes a victim of accident, injury or death while left alone, the parent could face stiff criminal penalties.

**Know your child** - A parent should understand their child's feelings and concerns regarding this major responsibility. Know your child's maturity and ability to be trusted. Recognizing a child's level of responsibility is a useful gauge in determining how well they can make decisions and cope in uncomfortable situations. Showing good judgment and responsibility in every day situations like crossing busy streets carefully and completing homework assignments on time is one positive indicator.

**Know your neighborhood and community** - A parent must consider the safety of as well as the trustworthiness of neighbors or bystanders. Knowledge of local support systems, including school administration and school transportation systems, can provide added confidence.

**Know that dangers do exist and can be prevented** - PCA-NJ advises parents to be realistic about the risks and dangers of leaving a child home alone and communicate these risks to their child. Parents must also prepare their children with information to equip them to handle emergencies and other situations by having fire drills, 'accident drills' and playing games of "what would you do if.....?"

The added responsibility of supervising younger siblings obviously requires even greater maturity; a parent needs to make sure that the younger child feels secure in the care of their sibling, which is not always the case.

Prevent Child Abuse - New Jersey maintains a resource center, which offers tip sheets on various topics, including questions that a parent should ask to help guide them through the decision to leave a child home alone.

Prevent Child Abuse - New Jersey is a statewide, non-profit agency that has been pursuing the mission of working to eliminate the abuse and neglect of children in all forms. 2004 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> year of service to New Jersey.

For more information, please call 1-800-CHILDREN or 732-246-8060 or visit us on the web at [www.PreventChildAbuseNJ.org](http://www.PreventChildAbuseNJ.org).

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