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More Children Staying Home Alone During Summer Break State offers tips on when it's safe for kids to be without adult supervision

TOPEKA – The summer months mean a welcomed break from school for Kansas kids, but they also signal a shift in the family's daily routine. Families may be considering leaving children home alone during the summer, instead of opting for a sitter. Safe Kids Kansas, the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) have some tips on how to decide if your child is ready to be home alone. And if you decide to keep the kids home, we have some important advice on keeping them safe.

"Developmentally, children are generally ready to be home alone around the age of 12 or 13," said Cherie Sage, State Director of Safe Kids Kansas. "However, children develop at different rates, so use your own discretion to determine your child's maturity level and capabilities. For example, if you have an impulsive 13-year-old who is a big risk taker, you might be hesitant to leave him/her alone. On the other hand, a thoughtful 11-year-old, who has a good track record of following household rules might be ready. Most states, including Kansas, don't have regulations or laws about when a child is considered old enough to stay at home alone or babysit another child."

DCF has some general guidelines to help you make the decision when your child is ready to be home alone:

- **Age**—Young children through age six, should never be left alone for even a short period of time. Kids six to nine can be left alone for only short periods of time. Children 10 and older can be left alone, depending on other factors.
- **Length of time alone**—Consider whether your child is ready to spend the whole day alone or if only a couple of hours is more appropriate.
- **Maturity**—Consider your child's ability to fend for himself/herself and your child's level of common sense. Certainly, children with developmental disabilities and emotion issues should be monitored closely.

Strong Families Make A Strong Kansas

- **Knowledge of emergency preparedness**—Ask your child if he/she knows what to do in the event of a fire, tornado, stranger at the door, etc. Ask “what ifs”.
- **Availability of adults**—Children must know how to reach a responsible adult at any point in the day for any reason, even if it’s just to provide reassurance if the child becomes fearful.
- **Insecurity**—Children should feel comfortable with the idea that they will be home alone. The more fearful they are, the less likely they will be able to respond appropriately to emergency situations.
- **Behavior**—Children who misbehave, vandalize, steal, intimidate neighbors, set fires or are a danger to themselves need close supervision.

“If you are unsure whether your child is ready to stay home alone, it is best to be cautious and take all measures necessary to ensure child safety,” DCF Secretary Gina Meier-Hummel said. “Never assume your child is ready because he/she seems old enough.”

Each year, more than 3 million kids, ages 14 and under, get hurt at home—and more than 2,000 children die from unintentional injuries in the home. Fire, suffocation, drowning, choking, firearm and poisoning are among the top leading causes of unintentional home injury death for this age group.

“Teach your children about hazards around the home, and make sure they know what to do in an emergency,” says Sage. “The first time your kids stay home alone, it should be for a short time and you should be nearby.”

Safe Kids Kansas also recommends parents take the following precautions to ensure your child’s safety:

- Carry a cell phone and keep it turned on. Make sure your children know where you will be and what time you will return. In addition to your cell phone number, post emergency numbers (police, fire, EMS, doctor and the poison control hotline, 800-222-1222) and a friend or neighbor’s number by every phone in the home. Teach your child their home address so they can tell emergency personnel where to dispatch assistance, if necessary.
- Prepare a snack or meal in advance — preferably one that does not need to be heated. If your children will need to cook, remind them never to leave an oven or stove unattended while cooking and to turn it off when they are finished.
- Make sure potentially poisonous or hazardous household items are locked up out of reach — especially medications, matches, lighters, weapons and cleaning products.
- Review your family’s emergency plans and make sure your children know what to do if the smoke alarm or carbon monoxide detector goes off. Practice two escape routes from each room.
- Review and practice plans for other types of emergencies, such as severe weather. Ensure they know where to go for emergency shelter.
- Show your children where you keep your first aid kit and how to use basic first aid supplies.

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