

**Summer's Here...What's Okay for Your Child?**  
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*Today Contributor*

Now that it's summer you're probably in the midst of planning vacations, day camps, tutoring and all sorts of activities that arise when school lets out and kids have lots of time on their hands. Although *your* daily schedule may remain the same, children view summer as either a time to kick back and hang out with friends, engage in new and interesting activities, or take on a job. If this is the year when you feel that your child is old enough for some new activities or responsibilities, check out these suggestions:

**Leaving your kids home alone**

Your child's individual level of maturity and responsibility play a large part in determining when they can be left alone at home, and for what amount of time. I've met twelve-year-olds who are more responsible than their teenage sibs, and are therefore safer bets to remain at home without parental supervision. In addition, your community will most likely have ordinances or policies about the minimum unattended age so you'll be wise to check on that.

Although you may have occasionally left your child at home for a few minutes while you quickly ran to the convenience store, staying alone for long stretches of time while you're at the office is a horse of a different color. Obviously you'd need to be easy to contact via office or cell phone and have a boss who understands that you'll be checking in at least once or twice a day with your children. In contemplating letting a youngster stay home without adult supervision it's important to consider whether the child can be trusted to stay inside the home without answering the door or letting friends in, and has the self-control to answer the phone only if he or she determines that it's a family member calling. Otherwise the call should be allowed to go to the answering machine without the child picking up.

Unsupervised children tend to become bored when left alone, break house rules, leave the premises, let others in, or find their way onto the Internet when parents are not on patrol. If you do decide to allow your tween or teen to remain home alone during the summer, make sure that the house rules (leaving the home, whom to let in, Internet and cell phone activities, chores to be accomplished) are discussed. Try to make the rules as black-and-white as possible—kids tend to slip through the cracks when shades of gray are involved!

By the early teen years, though, many kids are responsible and mature enough to follow house rules and to be allowed to stay home alone after school or during the summer. But, know your individual child—impulsive kids often act before thinking and wind up in trouble. If you're going to be worried while at work, it's just not worth it. Even though Junior might love the freedom and flexibility of having the house to himself, if you can't trust his judgment, don't do it. It's better to put up with some whining and complaining when you schedule him for yet another summer of day camps than to have to worry about his safety when he's not answering the phone and you can't leave work to check on him. It's important to not only consider what your child can't do when left alone, but also to

negotiate an agreement about what your expectations are in terms of activities encouraged or allowed. Should chores be completed? How about completing the summer reading list for next year's Language Arts class? Or, is this a good time to take an academic class online for extra credit? Be creative, think outside of the box...and most of all try to dissuade couch potato (screen time) activities!

### **Allowing babysitting other children**

Again, individual maturity plays a large role when determining whether your child is old enough to baby sit other children. Often kids do a better job when watching children from another family than when taking care of their own little brothers or sisters. Your thirteen- or fourteen-year-old son or daughter may do a bang-up job watching your neighbors' five and six year boys but have difficulty avoiding sibling battles with their own sister at home. If you do allow babysitting at a friend's home, be sure to cover the bases in terms of etiquette and responsibility. Make it a point to discuss the policies regarding:

- Whether friends can come over
- Exact rules of the other home
- Expectations of the other parents
- Limitations on their children
- Activities allowed and those not tolerated
- Communication techniques with the parents (cell phone, office phone)
- Whether your child is allowed to make phone calls to friends, or to use their computer or television
- What can be eaten and what's off-limits

The more your child understands the rules, limitations and expectations the greater the chance that they'll have a successful experience.

If you are considering letting your oldest child baby sit your younger ones, be sure that the situation is safe and secure. Consider paying your teen, just as you would compensate a "real" baby sitter, for responsible actions as well as devoting some of their summer to watching the sibs and not getting to hang around with their friends. Discuss what the teen is to do if a disagreement occurs between the kids (to call you, to have a fall-back position of "the baby sitter is always right until a parent comes home"), whether friends can come over, what electronics can be used while watching the younger sibs, what TV shows and other activities the younger children are allowed to engage in and whether the teen can drive the kids to the community pool, a movie or other activities. Again, the more specific the rules the less chance for miscommunication, false assumption and inappropriate behavior to occur.

### **Having sleepovers**

This may be the first summer that your son or daughter is interested in sleeping out or having friends spend the night. Usually by first or second grade a child begins to beg to have a best friend stay over, or to spend the night at their buddy's house. Hopefully both children will have a fun evening watching a video, eating popcorn, playing video games and actually finding time for some sleep! But don't be surprised if your six- or seven-year-old has a hard time making it through the night on the first few attempts at spending

the night out. Many parents have had the experience of being called at 10 PM, asking that the child be picked up. Nothing to worry about—it's totally normal for a little one to have night fears or homesickness the first few times around the block. Just pick up the child and tuck him in their own bed at home. Be careful not to embarrass the youngster—he's probably not proud of his tears and doesn't want his siblings to tease or to call him a baby.

If the kids are staying at your home, try to set up a structure and some rules ahead of time. Discuss what they'd like to do—make a craft, play a ball game outside, swim in the pool, as well as what they'd like for dinner. And when it comes to the evening meal, try to make it kid-friendly, easy and quick—they've got better things to do than sit at the dinner table with the family! Balance supervised play with some alone time, where they can spend time together without interference playing dolls, video or board games in the bedroom. Watch the sugary snacks, especially if you'd like the kids to sack out at an appropriate time. Many parents allow children to make tents and fall asleep in the living room watching television. Others prefer the children in the bedroom with lights out at a specific hour. The bottom line is that they fall asleep by ten or eleven so that they won't be grumpy in the morning. At this age, it's often best to have a nice breakfast, and to end the play date shortly after that. As this is a new experience, being away from their own parents and home for too long makes many children anxious or uncomfortable.

A few other tips that make this new summer “first” more successful for the entire family is to limit the frequency of sleepovers to once a week at the most. In the summer, children will beg for more frequent time with their friends, but sleepovers lend themselves to lack of sleep and grumpy, grumpy children! And, try to have only one friend stay over at a time—remember...three's a crowd!

### **Swimming without your supervision**

Many children live in communities where there are public swimming facilities—be it the pool at the recreation center or they live near beach or lakefront areas. Many community pools mandate that children are supervised by an adult—and they mean it! Others, however, allow preteens and teenagers to swim without supervision. If you've checked out your local pool and it's well supervised by certified lifeguards then it's probably appropriate for your middle or high schooler to be able to swim with his or her buddies. Before allowing this, though, personally check out the situation—are there enough lifeguards on duty for the number of children present? Are kids allowed to run wild through the area, or are there rules limiting their behavior in and out of the pool? In my opinion, grade school children should never be allowed near water without an adult or older teenager closely supervising—it's just too risky. Horseplay, although well-meaning, can result in serious injury in the water. And, remember to leave the cell phone or other distractions in your bag while supervising your children—the majority of drowning or near drowning incidents occur when the caretaker answers a phone or is preoccupied. Finally, swimming without adult supervision at a lake or beach should be off-limits for all grade-school age kids—no ifs, ands, or buts. Too much can happen, and there are often too few lifeguards on duty to provide adequate supervision.

### **Going to sleep-away camp**

Most children enjoy the fun, freedom and friendships of attending sleep-away camp, and look forward to it every year. There's a camp for just about any budget—from the less expensive Boy- or Girl-Scout programs and State environmental varieties to the more costly educational, specific-sport, religious or skill-based types. Trust me, if it's just pure fun that you're seeking for your kids, don't base the camp decision upon how much it costs! Inexpensive experiences are often the most fun, and don't take a large chunk out of the family budget.

In choosing an appropriate camping experience, word of mouth is probably the best place to begin—check with your friends to gather their experience with various camps, and also don't be afraid to ask the Camp Directors for a list of parents who will vouch for the safety and appropriateness of the program. And, do give them a call to personally get a feel for the climate of the program—the types of kids who flock to soccer camp may have distinctly different interests, personalities and summer expectations than those who opt for the latest computer skills summer program!

Also, check out the American Camp Association for a detailed description of all kinds of camping experiences—including religious, athletic, volunteer and skill-development programs. This information can be found online at:  
<http://www.acacamps.org/about/profile.php>

Many camps welcome kids as young as seven or eight years of age, but unless they are attending with an older sibling, I personally feel that children benefit more after they've reached the age of ten years or so. Again, age needs to be based upon the individual child's maturity and interest levels. If your eleven-year-old seems frightened of the idea, don't do it! Start out with over-nights at friends' homes, weekend retreats with Youth Groups or Scouting programs, and gradually build up to a one- or two-week sleep over experience. Don't push it—kids do not need to experience residential summer camp in order to develop into interesting, responsible adults! It's icing on the cake—and a terrific way to meet new friends and to garner new experiences, but not essential to child development.

If your child does attend camp for the first time this summer, expect some tears and homesick feelings...but leave it to the professionals to handle. Camp counselors are pro's at distracting children from their fears and redirecting them to neat activities. Then there's the child who leaves home for the first time without nary a backward glance, and if they weren't forced to either call home weekly or send emails they just may not communicate during the entire camp experience! Don't take it personally...Junior is just having a good time and asserting his independence.

### **Getting a first job**

This is easy to address—the answer to “when is it appropriate to get a first job” is “whenever someone will hire your child”! Employment is a marvelous way for your kid to increase self-confidence, build their sense of responsibility as well as to earn some money. Too often our children are treated as if they are entitled to things (material and

activity) just because they are kids. It's terrific when a child earns their own money to save, purchase coveted items (television for the bedroom if allowed, laptop computer, cell phone), or to use for various activities.

The kid who couldn't get out of bed in a timely fashion on school days will usually be up and at 'em when it comes to bugging you to drop her off for work at the mall Food Court. And, this is the same child who forgets to clear her plate at the dinner table, yet cheerfully wipes up tables and takes lunch orders at work! What's up with this? Well, first of all the child is now working for someone else and doesn't take the job/boss for granted as she does Mom/ Dad. Second, this job pays big bucks (at least in the kid's mind) and it's just not the same as making the bed or cleaning up the dinner dishes at home!

If you want your child to do better academically during the school year...encourage a job or a volunteer activity during the summer. The responsibility and confidence gleaned from this experience is not only a resume builder, but a life-skills builder. Run; don't walk, to the mall, movie theater or fast food establishment to help your child apply for a job or volunteer activity this summer. Make sure that the establishment is safe, the expectations are appropriate for your child's age, and that transportation is convenient.

Hoping that these new "firsts" run smoothly for you and your children, and that this summer leads to great family fun, friendships and neat experiences!