

**Q & A—How do I make it safe for my girls to be alone after school?
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Question: My girls are 11 and 14 years old, and I'm a single parent. I've always been able to arrange my work schedule to be there for them when they arrive home from the school bus. But, my job is changing and to keep my position I now need to work until 5 PM. They'll be home alone for about two hours each day after school. What can I do to make it safe for them so I won't have to worry so much?

Answer: Great question, and with the beginning of the school year it's important to address this problem now. I can imagine how anxious you are about letting your kids stay home alone after school for the first time. Those who have already crossed this bridge understand your concerns about safety, not just for the children but also for the house! If it helps, please realize that you are in good company with this situation. More than 3 million children younger than 12 years of age stay home alone at least part of each week, and an even greater percentage of teens fend for themselves on school days.

To help make things run smoothly and safely you need to set up some clear, fair ground rules. First, have the girls check in with you as soon as they come home. They can call your office phone or your cell phone and leave a message if you are unavailable. If you get to talk with them check how the day went, what homework is due and whether they need to get specific chores accomplished before you come home. I would suggest the rule that TV, computer, phone privileges to friends and video games (all recreational electronics, basically) are not to be used until homework and chores are completed. And, if the internet is allowed there should be standards to consider—parental guidelines concerning websites allowed (including a discussion of Myspace.com-type sites) and general usage of the internet (time allotted, sharing with the sister, IM'ing friends). You may need to employ parental controls upon TV stations, particularly cable channels at that time of day, as well as amount of television watched. Many families employ the rule that “no recreational electronics” are to be used until the parent comes home and checks that all homework and chores have been completed. This alleviates sibling battles about who gets the remote control as well as eliminating wasted time.

Guidelines about answering the telephone (letting calls go to the answering machine unless caller ID indicates that a family friend is on the phone) as well as answering the door (best to get them in the habit of not opening it unless an adult is home if it's not grandma or grandpa!) should be established and reviewed. With only 2 hours until you arrive home, I would suggest that they stay in the house completing work, and not being allowed to venture into the neighborhood, visit friends or even to allow friends to come over. “Things” tend to happen when kids are unsupervised and your children's safety as well as damage control for household items are at risk when allowing friends to visit while your kids are unsupervised.

Finally, if you're worried about damaging your girls' emotional or psychological growth because they are now "latchkey kids", you can relax! A study reported by the American Psychological Association noted that the success of "latchkey kids" depends more upon what they are doing with their time after school, rather than the fact that you aren't there for them. Kids who are allowed to hang out with friends without some form of adult supervision get into significantly more trouble than do those who are kept busy with homework and chores, especially if parents are checking in with them on a consistent basis via telephone.

If you're still worried about the situation, try to set up adult supervision with a neighborhood mom who is watching her own children—perhaps you can pay her for her time or baby sit her kids during some evening or weekend hours in exchange. Or, check into aftercare at the girls' schools, the YMCA or YWCA, church or other drop off programs. Perhaps their father or a grandparent can help out at least a few afternoons per week. This not only provides supervision, but can also be a great help with homework completion as well as good adult-child quality time spent together.