

Home alone for the summer: Is it child neglect? - AvvoStories

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FAMILY/KIDS, RELATIONSHIPS

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Many adults remember childhood summers filled with comfortable boredom, with days spent idly playing in the sun, watching TV, and biking around the neighborhood. For many kids today, summer is a blur of activity-filled day camps.

But what if you can't afford costly day camps or full-time childcare while school is out? Or you just want to take a [free-range parenting](#) approach, and let your kids enjoy the same lazy freedom you had as a child?

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Parents have a lot to think about when deciding if their children can be left home alone: the child's actual age, of course, but also their maturity, the presence of siblings, the length of time parents will be gone (and if they can be reached by the phone while absent), and whether there is a reliable adult nearby (like an apartment doorman or a trusted next-door neighbor) in case of emergency.

And then there's popular opinion to consider. In many communities, the standards for parental responsibility have become so extreme that many moms and dads fear the judgment of other parents or authorities more than they fear any possible mishap. A few highly publicized cases of run-ins over typical parenting choices have left many parents afraid to let their kids do anything alone.

Age limits

Because every situation is different, it's hard for authorities to write appropriate regulations around child safety. In states that offer guidelines for when kids are old enough to be left home alone, the minimum age ranges from age 6 in Kansas and Louisiana to 14 years old in Illinois (the same age that a child in Texas can be responsible for younger children).

Regulations in many states, including California, Hawaii, and New York, provide no specific age at which children can be left alone. That doesn't mean parents are off the hook in those states, though.

Child neglect and child endangerment laws are often broad enough that Child Protective Services can still get involved when kids are left alone. For example, the Tennessee courts' official website notes that although there is "no legal age for children to stay at home alone...obviously, young children under age 10 should not be left without supervision at any time." Tennessee parents of children under 10, then, should beware—obviously.

Fuzzy boundaries

Lenore Skenazy, the author who founded the Free-Range Kids movement, has compiled a state-by-state list of child safety laws as a reference to parents. However, many state laws are ambiguously worded, and countless parents have run afoul of law enforcement because of the personal opinions of police officers or neighbors.

Fortunately, absent clear-cut evidence of genuine neglect, most parents can successfully defend their choices in a court of law if necessary. As the state of Connecticut says, "It comes down to a judgment call on the part of parents."

Tagged children, crime, safety

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