

When is My Child Old Enough to...? It's Not Just a Number

Expert Advice from
Dr. Korb of
Center for Developing Minds

General Guidelines

Be home alone?

Although most would agree that it may be unreasonable to leave an eight year old alone at home, there may be problems finding consensus among parents as to what age is best. Very few states specify an age requirement for leaving children home. According to the National Child Care Information Center, only Illinois and Maryland currently have laws regarding a minimum age (12 years) for leaving a child home alone. It is difficult to specify a specific age, because readiness depends on the maturity of the child and the circumstances around the parent's departure.

Go on a sleepover?

Parents should consider two important factors when determining their child's sleepover readiness: their child's maturity and how well they know the friend's family. It is reasonable for a young child stay with relatives or the children of their parent's best friends. However, if parents are unsure if the family shares their values about bedtimes or television shows and movies, then it is better to wait until a child is old enough to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy, good and bad, and safe and unsafe. Most children get a sense of themselves between the ages of 10-12 years old.

Wear make-up?

It is natural for young teens to struggle with self concept and the need to fit in – make up is one way to feel grown up. These periods of growth and uncertainty are potential bonding opportunities for parents and child. Instead of telling your pre-teen she can't wear makeup, ask her if she would like to experiment with you on Saturdays. Then, introduce a minimal amount of make up in stages—that way you can both feel comfortable with how she will look as she evolves into a young lady.

Have a cell phone?

This really depends on two separate issues: is there a need, and is the child ready for the responsibility? For instance, if both parents work far from their child's school, a phone may be a useful security measure. For other students, a phone is a privilege, and with any privilege, children must demonstrate responsibility in order to obtain the reward. The child must be mature enough to protect the phone from loss or damage and able to avoid the temptation to call or talk to friends at inappropriate times.

Have a boyfriend/girlfriend?

When a child brings up dating, parents should ask the child what it means to have a boyfriend or girlfriend. For a 10 year old child, it likely means something to whisper about with friends, but it could mean something very different for a teenager. It is important that parents and children keep an open line of communication about dating, and giving a child an ultimatum could literally move a relationship 'under cover.'

Learn about the birds & the bees?

Sex education has three components: sexual development and reproduction, contraception and birth control, and relationships. Parents should begin talking about body changes before puberty and by the time a child enters puberty it is appropriate to discuss sex. I recommend the book *It's Perfectly Normal* as a good introduction to how the body changes. Parents should discuss birth control and relationships by around age 13.

Watch a rated PG-13/R movie (is Twilight or Star Wars okay for young kids)?

Parents should think about two things before letting their children watch mature movies: the movie content and the unintended permission to break rules. Research supports the notion that exposure to violence and sexual graphic content is desensitizing to children. I suggest using the justification test: the parent should be able to justify to the child why watching a particular film is a good idea. For instance, a parent might contend that watching *Schindler's List* is valuable because it is a movie about history. It might be more difficult to justify Halloween 3. If it doesn't pass that test, maybe the child should pass on the movie.

Have a Facebook page?

Facebook says you have to be 13 because an account opens access to many inappropriate groups for children. Regardless of the age a child starts Facebooking, parents should monitor their child's internet use through adolescence. I recommend that parents open their own Facebook account and 'friend' their child so that they can monitor the appropriateness of the child's interactions.

Start doing chores?

Age two. Seriously, by the time a child is old enough to mess up, they are old enough to clean up. Introducing a child to age appropriate expectations promotes development and teaches responsibility. Chores are not punitive; they are about helping the family. Parents provide children with privileges and support, children should learn to reciprocate. A two-year old should clean up with assistance, a four year old can clear their plate after dinner, and six-year olds can take empty trash cans in from the curb. Ten-year olds can set the table and 13-year olds can unload the dishwasher. Start early, be consistent, and appreciate their help. | M |

Damon Korb, M.D., Director of The Center for Developing Minds (CDM), is a board certified behavioral and developmental pediatrician.