



Guidelines for Leaving Your Child Alone or Babysitting

At What Age Can a Child be Left Home Alone?

Contrary to most peoples' perception, there is no specific age at which a child can be left unattended. The *Child and Family Services Act* states that parents of children under the age of 16 years must make "reasonable provisions" for their care. This requires parents to ensure that if they leave their children at home alone, they have made appropriate efforts to ensure their children's safety. This must go hand-in-hand with a common sense approach. For instance, ensuring children have emergency phone numbers, are mature and responsible and are not left for long periods of time without adult supervision.

The Halton Children's Aid Society (Halton CAS) strongly suggests parents not leave a child under the age of ten alone. If the child is under the age of ten and the children's aid society (CAS) intervenes, the onus is on the parent to provide reasons and rationale to the CAS that their child has not been left in a potentially harmful situation.

In addition, the *Criminal Code of Canada* includes the offence of abandoning a child. Everyone who unlawfully abandons or exposes a child who is under the age of ten years, so that his/her life is or is likely to be endangered, or his/her health is or is likely to be permanently injured, is guilty of an offence that carries a penalty of imprisonment of not more than two years.

At What Age Can a Child Babysit Another Child?

Choosing a suitable babysitter is a very important decision.

Again, this requires a common sense approach. Not all children are responsible enough by the age of 12 years, for instance, to babysit other children. It is important to know there is no age specified by law for babysitting. It is a matter of the parent determining if a teenager is responsible enough to provide a safe environment for their younger children.

Consideration should be given as to whether the babysitter has taken a certified babysitting course, has previous babysitting experience with positive references and appears to have a good rapport with their child. It is important younger babysitters are not used for lengthy periods of time.

Selecting a person to leave in charge of your child's care is a very serious and important task for parents.

This list of guidelines will assist parents in selecting and training a suitable candidate for babysitting.



Selection Guidelines

Age should not always be the determining factor. Although the minimum age recommended by the Halton CAS and for a babysitter is 12, not every 12-year old or teenager is mature enough to care for a baby or child. Take the time to get to know the prospective babysitter and use your discretion to determine if they seem to have a strong sense of responsibility to care for your child.

Has the babysitter taken a babysitting course or First Aid course? Courses are available from Canadian Red Cross, St. John Ambulance, community Parks and Recreation and the Board of Education.

Reference checks are important. Even if you know the potential babysitter well, do not hesitate to contact other parents who have used his/her services. Even though the babysitter may be a wonderful neighbour, they may not have the skills or maturity to look after children.

Older siblings are not always the best candidates for babysitting a younger child. Some may resent the expectation placed on them to provide care for their sibling.

Training

Have a safety plan. Ensure the babysitter knows how to call 9 -1-1 and that they know the address of your home and the major cross streets. The baby sitter should also know how to reach you while you are gone (phone number, cell phone, pager, etc.) and they should also know which neighbour they can rely on in an emergency.

Since a fire can start in minutes, the babysitter should also know a fire safety evacuation plan regardless of the length of time you will be away.

Start your babysitter with short intervals to gear up for a longer night out. This will help you and the baby sitter build confidence.

After returning at the end of the babysitter's shift, pay attention to the types of things they comments on. Did they hit on points of concern a parent would notice, e.g., if the child ate, did the child seem sad, happy, anxious, did they spend time together reading, colouring, etc.

After the babysitter has left, talk to your child about their experience. Some questions you may want to ask include: What activities did they do together? Did the child like the babysitter? Parents are responsible for the safety and well-being of their children.

Parents will be held accountable by the CAS and Police if there has been an injury or risk to their child if the child has been left alone or in the care of another person under the age of 16 years.

