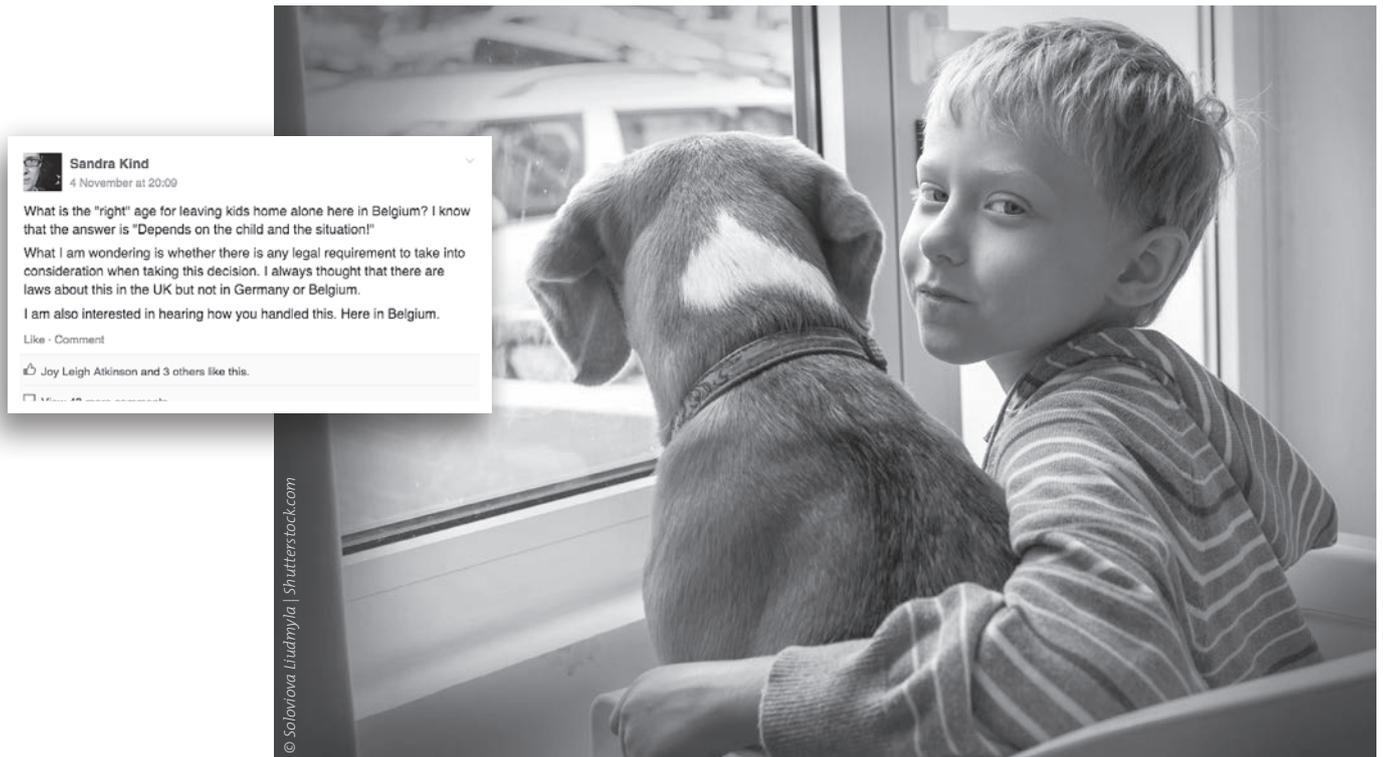


# Home *alone*

BY SANDRA DREHSEL

*A while ago, I asked the members of the BCT Facebook group their opinion on the 'right' age to leave a child home alone. Even though I knew the answers would be diverse, the interest in the topic was higher than I had anticipated.*



As I expected, there is no 'right' age. So I read some articles on the topic and talked to my friends about it. Soon I noticed that there are a few points that come up again and again.

The legal question is easy to answer: there is no minimum age for leaving kids home alone. Not in Belgium, not in the UK, not in most parts of the US and not in my native Germany. All these countries do have laws about neglect and they all hold parents responsible for their minors. It is up to the parents to make sure their child is ready and can handle the situation well.

In my family, it had all started a couple of months ago when my son asked me: 'Mum, can I PLEASE stay at home and play while you pick up little sister?' The

first time I said no, explaining that we first needed to make sure he was ready. I wanted him to know, for instance, how to use the phone so he could call me if anything came up. He was fine with that. As I asked around and read more on the subject, the following things proved to be equally important as using the phone. They helped both my child and myself to feel safe about leaving him home alone.

## **Make sure they are ready**

The first important thing my son had already done: He took the initiative and asked whether he could stay home alone. Children need to be ready to do it; you'll want them to feel good about it. If it is you who takes the initiative, start with very short periods of time, so your child can start feeling safe.

It might just be you going out in the garden, or across the street to talk to the neighbours. Baby steps first.

## **Make sure they have enough to do while you are away**

My son often plays alone in his room when the rest of the family is busy (or asleep) and always finds something to do. I therefore knew that if he wanted to stay home to play, he would be just fine. Not all children are happy to look for things to do on their own, so you could help them by preparing activities to keep them busy (toys, books, audiobooks, etc.).

## **Keep food within reach**

Even busy children get hungry eventually, so it is good for them to know how to get something to eat and drink safely.

My son usually just drinks some water and eats some cereal when he is up early and hungry. Since he never stays home alone for more than 20 minutes, this is all he needs for now. Whether it is just 20 minutes or longer for your children, make sure they know their way around the kitchen. Nothing is worse than being home alone hungry and not being able to grab a bite. Preparing something will keep them from trying to climb up somewhere high to reach certain foods.

### Teach them how to reach you

One of the friends I talked to has three slightly older kids than mine. She told me how, at the beginning, she always called herself from the landline before leaving the house. Her kids only had to learn how to use re-dial to be able to call their mum. I simply put my name first in our phone's address book and showed my son how to get there. It just so happens that my husband's number is in second place so my son can call him if he does not reach me. When he is allowed to stay home alone, we always check whether he remembers how to call me. When he tries it and my phone rings it gives him a sense of security.

Being able to call mum or dad is not only important in an emergency. Another friend's son would always call his mum after a while just to make sure she was really available in case he needed her. And his mum never needed to call and check on him either because she knew he was OK.

### Don't open the door!

Children are naturally curious and will often come running to the door when somebody rings. I never lock the door by key when I leave, so my son can get out in case of an emergency. So what does he do when the bell rings? He just goes to the window, checks who is outside and only opens the door if he recognises a good friend of the family. When we don't expect anyone, he is allowed to simply ignore the ringing.

### Explain what they should do in an emergency

This is something every family should talk about, not only when leaving a child alone at home. What should

## BCT FACEBOOK GROUP – WHAT YOU SAID:

**Happy:** I have my kids primed for what to do if suddenly in a fire, locked out, how to handle unexpected callers at door. To me, it's not just about leaving them alone but teaching them the life skills to cope with unexpected.

**Genevieve:** However, I don't yet leave them [12 and 10] in charge of their little brother (not fair if there's an accident), and I remind them from time to time what to do in a fire.

**Genevieve:** I was a bit concerned when I came home and found the washing machine repair man there, let in by my 12-year-old. I expressed my concern to my neighbour, a child psychologist, who was frankly more shocked that I hadn't waited at home all day for the repairman.

**Elizabeth:** I was 8 when I started staying home alone (at night even.) I used the stove, made myself dinner, did the dishes and bathed and put myself to bed. I was definitely by far more mature than my now almost 8-year old. She has a completely different personality than I did. I'm not sure I'll ever trust her home alone! LOL.

**Susan:** I also believe we need to teach our children to be independent. Sure there are dangers in the world - even for adults - but if we were to live our lives afraid of everything bad that could potentially happen, what a sad life we would lead.

**Terese:** The right recipe seems to be a healthy dose of teaching life skills combined with the appropriate amount of independence/responsibility. We want to keep them safe but don't want to smother them and the "right" age will be different depending on the child and on where they need to go / where they live.

they and the family do in case of a fire? Which of the neighbours should they turn to? For me, this also means greeting the neighbours and talking to them when the kids are around so they know each other. Two of the families at our end of the street know our children and I have asked them whether my kids could ring their bell should there ever be an emergency. They agreed and my children know that it is safe to go there.

Even though there is no 'right age' to leave your child alone at home, these

points have helped me prepare my son and myself for the next "Mum, can I PLEASE stay at home and play while you pick up little sister?" As circumstances change, we both will adapt.

Maybe these things will get you started on deciding what is important to you and your child. Every family has different priorities. I would love to hear how you went about finding the right moment to leave your child home alone: [www.facebook.com/groups/BrusselsChildbirthTrust/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/BrusselsChildbirthTrust/)

### Further reading:

- Home alone – How to decide whether to leave your child home alone (UK): [www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/leaving-child-home-alone/](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/leaving-child-home-alone/)
- Leaving Your Child Home Alone (US): [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/homealone.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/homealone.pdf)
- À quel âge peut-on laisser son enfant seul? (BE): [www.laligue.be/leligueur/articles/a-quel-age-peut-on-laisser-son-enfant-seul](http://www.laligue.be/leligueur/articles/a-quel-age-peut-on-laisser-son-enfant-seul)
- Elterliche Aufsichtspflicht (DE): [www.muenchen.de/rathaus/dms/Home/Stadtverwaltung/Sozialreferat/jugendamt/Kinderbeauftragte/Ombudstelle/aufsichtspflicht/Elterliche%20Aufsichtspflicht.pdf](http://www.muenchen.de/rathaus/dms/Home/Stadtverwaltung/Sozialreferat/jugendamt/Kinderbeauftragte/Ombudstelle/aufsichtspflicht/Elterliche%20Aufsichtspflicht.pdf)

And if you are moving on to the next stage of letting your child go out on his/her own, read US journalist Leonore Skenazy's account of letting her nine-year-old ride the New York subway by himself

[www.nysun.com/opinion/why-i-let-my-9-year-old-ride-subway-alone/73976/](http://www.nysun.com/opinion/why-i-let-my-9-year-old-ride-subway-alone/73976/) and also her book 'Free Range Kids' in which she discusses the issue of balancing children's freedom and safety.