Using the guidelines and other factors mentioned...

Consider the following Questions and Tips

- How does your child feel about the situation?
- Look at the child's age in relationship to growth, behavior and judgement.
- What are the responsibilities your child will be left with?
- Will the child be able to handle those responsibilities?
- How long will the child be left alone? The first few times should be quite short. You will be able to stay away longer once the child is confident about safety.
- What are the safety risks if your child is alone? (fires, accidents, burglaries, etc.)
- Can your child say no to peer pressure if friends encourage the child to break rules in your absence?

Safety tips to Consider

Encourage the child to discuss feelings about being alone. If a child seems afraid, help her to talk about it and help her feel safe. Establish ground rules. This avoids confusion about what you expect and adds to the child's own sense of security. Careful planning can help insure physical safety and emotional well being for your child.

Remove fire hazards and install smoke detectors. Hold fire drills with each child "practicing" what to do and where to go in case of fire.

Teach children basic first aid and have a first aid kit available.

Have children practice emergency (911) calls with you, giving their full address and directions if necessary.

Review safety rules such as not playing with matches, knives and scissors.

Teach children when and if to answer the door and phone. Warn children to never let strangers into the house.

Instruct children to never tell callers that they are alone. They should say that the parent is busy and offer to take a message. If a call seems suspicious, they should call you or another adult.

Have a clear understanding about use of ovens, stoves, and other appliances.

Provide projects and materials as well as juice and nutritious snacks.

Set up an emergency plan with a relative, friend or neighbor who may be unable to care for your child but who would be willing to be called by the child for advice or reassurance in "small emergencies" when you are unavailable by phone.

When you leave, post your house address and important phone numbers near the telephone.

Establish a daily routine in which your child calls you or a designated person when she arrives home.

If your child comes home after school, give her keys and perhaps an attractive key chain. The keys should be carried out of sight so that the child isn't easily identified as one on his own.

Arrange some after school activities such as clubs, scouts, sports or the library. If you need help with transportation, arrange to trade weekend driving or child care with other parents.

When you return home, praise your child for doing a good job. You may be pleasantly surprised at how readily and how well your child assumes responsibility when fully prepared and given the opportunity.

For more information, please call your local county social service agency.

Provided to you by the North Dakota Department of Human Services;
Children and Family Services Division
Child Protection Services

Home Alone

Is your child ready?

Answers to the most commonly asked questions about supervising children and self-care.

Is your child ready for self-care?

There are both risks and opportunities associated with self-care. Parents need to carefully decide whether self-care is appropriate for their children.

Most parents are aware of threats from accidents, fire, or harm from strangers and make special efforts to deal with them. There are also dangers to children's emotional well being.

Children in self-care must deal with feelings of loneliness, boredom, fear, rejection, and insecurity. The increased responsibility for chores and caring for younger siblings may be more than a child is ready to handle. Sometimes, older siblings physically or sexually abuse a younger child left in their care. Teenagers can turn their fear and loneliness inward, leading to depression. Experimenting with sex, drugs, tobacco and alcohol are much more likely with teens in self-care. Peer pressure, too, can be a negative influence, which a child may not have the confidence to overcome.

When parents invest time and energy to make the right decision about self-care for their children, the potential benefits increase. Children can gain an increased sense of self-confidence, responsibility, and independence.

Who is responsible?

The ultimate responsibility for the safety, care, well being and behavior of children remains with the parent or caregiver, whether they are there to personally supervise them or not.

What does the law say about child supervision?

North Dakota does not have a law which provides an age when children can be left alone. However, guidelines have been developed by the Department of Human Services and are used by county social service agencies in North Dakota.

What are the age guidelines?

Children left home alone should be able to demonstrate knowledge of where their parents or other responsible adults are, how to reach them, and the length of time caregivers will be absent. Children should also know emergency procedures and arrangements for emergency situations.

• Ages 0-4

The guidelines state that all children under age 4 years be in view of their caregiver at all times while outside of the home. Inside the home, the caregiver should be available and able to respond to the child to provide immediate care and protection from harm. Children of this age should not be left in vehicles unless they are in proper restraints (unable to put the vehicle in gear) and in direct view of the caregiver at all times.

• Ages 4-17

Children 8 years and under should be supervised at all times with a caregiver available. An 8 year old should not be left in charge of other children.

Children who are 9 years old should not be left unsupervised for periods greater than two hours during the daytime. A child of this age should not be unsupervised at night and should not supervise other children.

Children who are 10 and 11 years old may be left alone for longer periods of time. However, caution is advised in leaving a child unsupervised during sleeping hours. Children this age should not be responsible for younger children.

Children who are the age of 12 years and older may be permitted to act as baby-sitters. It is recommended that they successfully complete an approved child care training course.

Caution is advised on the number of children left in care, length of time for caregiving responsibility, factors regarding special needs of children left in care and resources available to the child providing care.

• Teens

Children under 15 years of age should be attended overnight. Caution should be taken in leaving 15 - 17 year olds alone overnight. Extended absences of caregivers (such as over a weekend) are not recommended.

Is age the only factor to consider?

The age of the child is not the only factor that should be considered when children are left alone.

Other factors include:

- the maturity of the child
- emotional health factors
- the child's physical or mental limitations
- length of time alone
- time of day or night
- other children present to be supervised
- location and environmental conditions
- frequency of being left alone
- the accessibility of a parent or other adult