The school year has come to an end, to the delight of many children. For some parents, this turn of the calendar brings with it uncertainty and worry. With school out for the summer, working parents must answer the question of how they will ensure their children are properly supervised while they are out of the home. At some point, all parents will ask themselves whether or not their child is old enough to stay home alone. Because children develop on their own timeline, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to this question. Parents, by law, must ensure that their children have "supervision appropriate to the child's age." To help guide parents in this decision, Benton County Human Services maintains a policy that states staff will investigate reports of children left home alone under the following conditions:

-children age 7 and younger left alone for any period of time

-children age 8–10 who are alone for more than 3 hours

-children age 11–13 alone for more than 12 hours

-children age 14–15 who are unsupervised while parents are absent for more than 24 hours

-children age 16-17 may be left alone more than 24 hours, but need to have an appropriate plan in place as to how to respond to an emergency

These are guidelines and each situation must be assessed based upon the individual child's maturity level, safety plan, and available support resources.

Parents should work with children to prepare them for being home alone. Supervising children while they learn to cook, teaching children basic first aid, showing children how and when to dial 911, and ensuring they know what to do in the event of an emergency (like fire or severe weather) will help both the parent and the child be much more at ease when the time comes for them to go at it alone. Parents should also discuss a safety plan with children to make sure they understand things like how to reach a trusted adult, whether they should answer the door or telephone, whether they are allowed to go outside, what the rules are for internet access, etc. Finally, parents may want to consider taking advantage of technology to help keep their children safe. Alarm and monitoring systems are an option many choose for providing peace of mind. Most home security systems have the ability for someone to remotely monitor people coming and going from the home, even allowing parents to remotely communicate with visitors at the door. Certain systems may include cameras in the home to help parents keep track of what is going on when they are away.

For children who are placed in a caretaker role for other children, Benton County has the following guidelines:

-children under age 11 may not care for other children

-children age 11-15 who are placed in a child care role are subject to the same time restrictions as those left home alone (see list above)

-children age 16-17 may be left home alone in a child care role for more than 24 hours provided they have an adequate plan in place for appropriate adult backup support.

Deciding when a child is old enough to care for themselves or another child should be an informed and well-planned decision. When your child is ready to take that step, take the time to prepare them for success. For more crime prevention information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: https://co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.