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For middle-grades kids, staying home alone a big question

By Tara Malone

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Cassidy Hamilton, 13, has been given more independence by her parents. She'll spend time on her own this summer. (Heather Charles, Chicago Tribune / June 22, 2010)

In the past, Chris Hamilton carefully pieced together a summertime schedule for her daughter, rotating her between sports camps, library programs and family members in the neighborhood while Hamilton and her husband worked.

This year, she took a different tack.

The Hamiltons registered Cassidy, 13, for volleyball camp, but left the rest of her days open, allowing the eighth-grader more independence.

"I just need to trust her to make her own decisions to a certain degree, and I have to know that I've taught her well enough to make good decisions," Hamilton said. "But it's hard."

With the end of the school year comes the end of established after-school care and day care programs. For parents with children in the middle grades, the summertime dilemma raises questions of when a child is old enough to stay home alone, and for how long.

At what age would you let your child stay home alone? Tell us at Trib Nation.

Families increasingly confront the challenge because there are more households where both parents work.

In 2008, 71 percent of people with school-age children in Illinois reported that all parents in the family worked, census figures show. That's up from 64 percent in 2000.

A 2005 report by the Florida-based William Gladden Foundation estimated that between 10 million and 15 million children nationwide take care of themselves when school is not in session.

"More children today have less adult supervision than ever before in American history," its authors concluded.

The home-alone decision is difficult because there's no one right answer, no magic age that signals self-reliance, experts say.

Reginald Richardson, vice president of The Family Institute at Northwestern University, said independence should build gradually, rather than be granted all at once.

"The kids might stay home while you run to the grocery store for a 15- or 20-minute trip. That begins communicating to your child that you trust them," said Richardson.

The topic isn't just academic for Richardson, who left his 12- and 13-year-old sons home for two weeks at the start of summer.

The boys got a list of chores every morning. On Mondays, that meant laundry. They also had a book list and a summer assignment: write a book report for their parents by summer's end. Only when Richardson or his wife checked that daily duties had been done could the boys head outside or ride their bikes.

Experts urge parents to tailor the approach to suit each child's age and maturity. Siblings can complicate matters, as can the environment where kids live. In the city or suburbs, though, watchful neighbors help.

That was a key factor for the Hamiltons when Cassidy broached the idea of staying home alone.

"My Mom, Dad and I have a great relationship, but you know, I'm just growing up a bit," Cassidy said. "I wanted more independence."

The retired couple next door eased Hamilton's concerns, as did her daughter's ever-present cell phone and her husband's office being just five minutes away.

Under the family agreement, Cassidy can walk to the library, take out the dogs or visit friends as long as she calls her parents first and stays close to their north suburban home. She can make herself a snack, but not touch the oven.

Still, Hamilton worries whether it might be too much, too soon.

"It has taken a while, and she's definitely at an in-between age," Hamilton said.

For parents seeking counsel on whether their child is ready, the state offers little guidance.

According to the Illinois Juvenile Court Act, a child younger than 14 should not be left alone for an "unreasonable period of time." But the law does not specify how long that is.

While they acknowledge the law's vagueness, child advocates and legal experts say age alone shouldn't merit a green light to stay home unsupervised.

"We all would love to have one single rule that we could allow, but kids are not that simple," said Kendall Marlowe, a spokesman with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

Bruce Boyer advises parents to follow their instincts.

"You've got to know your child, know what the situation is and you've got to use common sense," said Boyer, director of the Civitas Child Law Center at the Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

Park districts from Buffalo Grove to Naperville offer courses to prepare children to stay alone. The American Red Cross provides an hourlong class called "Home Alone" for 5- to 9-year-olds as well as baby-sitting classes, with many of the same lessons.

"We tell them this does not certify them to stay home alone. It's such a subjective thing," Red Cross instructor Donna Giove said.

On a recent Saturday in Arlington Heights, Giove walked a dozen teenagers through responding to an unruly toddler or an unexpected knock on the door. While it was a baby-sitting class, Giove said the most common question she hears about it from parents is: "So, can my kids stay home alone now?"

William Hoffman, 12, jotted down notes as Giove covered the basics of CPR and first aid. The seventh-grader started staying home with his younger sisters for quick stints this winter.

His mother, Dawn Hoffman, spelled out the ground rules first: Don't open the door. Don't even go near it if the bell rings. Don't answer the phone unless it's Mom or Dad on the caller ID. Don't have friends over. And stay indoors with the security alarm on.

"I'm Ms. Cautious," Hoffman said with a shrug. "But I know what's out there and it scares me."

Hoffman said she hoped the Red Cross training would cover what she'd overlooked and give William the "confidence to know he can handle things."

For other parents, no age seems comfortable to leave kids alone for a long stretch of time.

Angela Ackmann has never left her children, ages 16 and 9, alone for more than three hours.

"It's just not me," the Elgin mother said. "You want your child to feel comfortable in their skin. You want them to engage with the world, but the world is a very scary place."