

BABYSITTING – GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

Deciding on a babysitter for your child is one of the most important decisions you will have to make as a parent.

The Child and Family Services Act says that children under 10 should not be left alone. Parents have a legal responsibility to ensure that their children under 10 years of age are safe. Young babies and small children must be looked after at all times. Even children who are eight and nine years old cannot be left alone for any extended length of time. Parents are always expected to prepare their children for emergencies and to think about the maturity and reliability of their child in all situations when children are alone.

Even after the age of 10, parents are legally required to make good arrangements for their children's supervision until they are 16. This expectation is meant to help parents make important decisions about their children's safety and well being. Parents should remember that a child's age does not always match his or her level of maturity or responsibility. Some 10 year old children are capable of caring for themselves for a few hours. Others of the same age are not. Parents must decide when a child is ready to be left alone and for how long.

When a parent decides that a child needs to be supervised, consideration must be given to who is capable to provide the supervision responsibly. Often, parents think about older children as babysitters for younger children, and they have questions about how to choose someone who will be appropriate for their specific child.

It is important to remember that every child is different. Just as a law cannot dictate exactly when your child who is 10 or older can be safely left alone, there is no law about the age at which a child over 10 can begin to babysit. It is your responsibility to choose a person capable of managing your child's specific needs in the time you will be away from home.

Parents must use their judgment to determine when an older child is ready to provide reliable care for younger children. You care for your child every day and so you are the best person to make decisions about who is best suited to care for their specific needs.

When choosing a babysitter, there are many factors to consider. The person's maturity, abilities, reliability, past history and problem solving skills should be considered.

Questions to ask yourself

Does the older child demonstrate good judgment and have experience working out problems independently? Would he or she know what to do in the case of a flood or a fire, or in the case of an accident or injury to a younger child?

Does the older child or adult have any behavioural or emotional problems or drug or alcohol problems that would interfere with his or her ability to act responsibly?

Does your own child have any behavioural or emotional problems that would make his or her care difficult for a babysitter?

How does your child feel about being left with this babysitter? Is he or she likely to become upset or frightened?

How long will the babysitter be needed? Longer periods of time mean that the babysitter will be responsible for more tasks that require an increased level of maturity and knowledge.

How old is the child to be cared for? A 12 year old may not be a suitable choice to babysit an infant or toddler, but it may be appropriate for the 12 year old to provide after-school supervision of a seven or eight year-old.

Your Responsibilities

You must make sure to give any babysitter emergency numbers and procedures. Alert your babysitter to any allergies your child might have or any other medical or physical conditions.

When your child is home with an older child as a babysitter, there must be a clear and reliable way for the babysitter to reach you. You must be quickly available or arrange for another responsible adult to be available to help in the case of emergency.

You will need to tell your babysitter about your rules for your child and your household. For instance, can

the babysitter or your child have friends over, and what should the babysitter say to people who call for you on the phone or come to the door?

You should look for babysitters who have completed a babysitting course such as those offered by St. John's Ambulance or the Red Cross. These courses are available for children as young as 11.

Children under 16 cannot be hired to babysit during school hours unless they have written permission from the local Board of Education.

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