GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency

Administrative Issuance: CFSA-08-7

TO: All CFSA and Private Agency Staff

FROM: Roque Gerald, Interim Director

DATE: December 24, 2008

RE: Children's Self-Care and Care for Others

This administrative issuance provides recommended guidelines for the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) and contract agency social workers to determine when a child is considered safe enough to be left at home alone to self-care or care for others. These guidelines have been developed in consideration of neighboring state guidelines and in collaboration with the Office of General Counsel and CFSA's Office of Child Protective Services. In order to ensure that social workers are well-informed to respond to general inquiries from the public, as well as for workers to respond to allegations, the guidelines in this issuance shall serve as the minimally acceptable standards.

DC Official Code §16-2301(9) (A) (ii) defines a neglected child as a child "who is without proper parental care or control, subsistence, education as required by law, or other care or control necessary for his or her physical, mental, or emotional health, and the deprivation is not due to the lack of financial means of his or her parent, guardian, or custodian".

In order to discern whether or not a child has been left "without proper parental care", qualifying circumstances, and/or maturity level of the child's ability to handle a variety of situations, shall be considered. If an immature or very young child is left alone even for a short span of time, it may constitute an incident of neglect. As always, the welfare of the child remains paramount to CFSA.

CFSA shall follow conservative guidelines that are applicable to all CFSA and/or contract agency social workers assessing an unsupervised child, as well as responding to inquiries from the general public. It is earnestly advised that emergency preparedness skills (including fundamental first aid), contact numbers and/or emergency contact persons (including relatives and/or neighbors) are familiar to any child left home alone.

If you have questions regarding this issuance, please contact the Office of the General Counsel.

Recommended Guidelines for a Child Left at Home Alone

When thinking about leaving children alone, whether for a short or long time, it is important for parents to consider all of the risk involved. Part of caring for children is providing adequate supervision. Parents are responsible for their children's welfare until they reach adulthood. Under some circumstances, a parent can be charged with neglect for leaving children unattended. CFSA recommends that the following be considered before a child is left alone:

1. A young child (10 & under) should never be unsupervised for any period of time. This includes leaving a child unattended in a car, on a playground, or in the yard. When supervising from a distance, the determining considerations should be potential dangers in the environment as well as the ability of the caretaker to have an unobstructed view of the child and if necessary, the ability to intervene. If possible, yards should be fenced.

2. If a child is considered immature and needs direct onsite supervision by an adult or responsible teenager who has been designated by an adult to supervise a younger sibling or neighbor or friend, they should not be left alone for more than two (2) or four (4) hours respectively, and only during daylight hours but not after dark.

   Note: Being left alone after dark is not the sole reason for compromising the safety of a child.

3. If a child is considered mature, but needs monitored care, they may be left alone for up to five (5) hours but not after 10 pm at night and must have access to a parent by phone, or a responsible adult who lives a short distance from the child's home.

4. If a child is capable of self-care, they may be left unsupervised during the day with appropriate emergency instructions. Although it is not advisable, there may be exceptions or special cases when an unsupervised overnight period is allowed, but the child must have access to a parent, an immediate neighbor, or responsible adult.

In addition to the above-stated guidelines, an assessment shall be made as to whether it is safe for a child to be home alone, without supervision, in light of the following considerations:

1. The age of the child
2. The physical, mental and emotional maturity level of the child
3. The behavioral history of the child
4. Prior preparation by a parent, guardian, caretaker or responsible adult who has discussed self-care with the child, use of potentially dangerous appliances (such as an iron or stove), emergency preparedness and contact numbers, and/or fire escape plans
5. The accessibility of a parent, guardian, caretaker, or responsible adult by phone or in person

Recommended Guidelines for Child-to-Child Direct Supervision

In some circumstances, such as a parent leaving for work early in the morning before the start of school, the parent (or guardian) may decide or need to leave a child alone to supervise another child in the home. In assessing the ability of a child to supervise another child, the guidelines outlined in the sections above shall be given consideration. Under no circumstances shall a child age 12 or under be allowed to supervise another child. Onsite supervision by an adult or responsible teenager who has been designated by an adult must be provided for a child age 11 and younger.

Recommended Babysitting Guidelines

When determining if a child is ready to baby sit another child, the same considerations in the sections above must be followed, including the emotional, physical, and mental maturity of the supervising child. It is highly recommended that any child responsible for another child complete the Red Cross Babysitting Certification Class (designed for children 11 to 15 years of age) in order to qualify.

Recommended Training for Social Workers for Using these Guidelines

As the delicate nature of an allegation of neglect is likely to require a social worker to use skills that are not in the same category of discernment for those workers screening hotline calls, it is recommended that CFSA Hotline workers be trained separately from Intake & Investigation workers for best use of this Administrative Issuance. The Intake worker shall require skills in determining the severity of the allegations and the evidence of abandonment.

ATTACHMENT A
DEFINITIONS

In this administrative issuance, the following terms have the meanings indicated:

A. **Direct Supervision** – Onsite supervision by an adult or responsible teenager who has been designated by an adult to supervise a younger sibling or neighbor or friend onsite.

B. **Monitored Care** – Parents designate a responsible adult who is accessible by phone and lives or is accessible from a short distance to the child's home. The monitoring adult is one who checks in with the child at intervals and ensures that the child is capable and knowledgeable in handling emergency situations.

C. **Self-Care** –Parents or a legal guardian have ensured that the child is trained and competent in home-alone skills and/or has completed Red Cross Babysitting Certification.

D. **Child** – An individual who is under the eighteen (18) years of age.

E. **Lack of Supervision** – Any minor under the age of 21 years or child under eighteen (18) years of age whose parent or other person responsible for the minor's or child's welfare leaves the minor or child without supervision for an unreasonable period of time without the regard for the mental or physical health, safety, or welfare of that minor or child.

F. **Neglect** – The leaving of a child unattended or failure to give proper care and attention to a child by any parent or other person who has permanent or temporary care or custody or responsibility for supervision of the child under circumstances which the child's health or welfare is harmed or place at substantial risk of harm, or mental injury to the child or a substantial risk of mental injury (Article-Family Law §5-701r).

G. **Babysitting** – A person engaged to care for or watches over one or more children who need attention or guidance in the temporary absence of parents or guardians (Title 29, DCMR §29-600.1L).

H. **Substitute Care** – Care provided by an adult or licensed daycare provider who is charged with adequate and appropriate supervision of a child that requires monitored care or direct supervision (Title 29, DCMR §29-600. 1K).