

# Are Kids More Capable than Today's Parents Realize?

Yesterday, we published [a piece](#) on legislators who want to make it “illegal for parents to leave any child younger than seven alone in a car, or any child under age 10 home alone.” One of the legislators behind this law noted the harms of leaving children alone, saying that they could get into any number of scrapes and dangerous situations.

His words came back to me this morning as I was thinking about one of my favorite chapters in Laura Ingalls Wilder's [Farmer Boy](#) entitled “Keeping House.” The chapter describes how Almanzo Wilder's parents went to visit relatives, leaving Royal, Eliza Jane, Alice, and Almanzo (ages 13, 12, 10, and 8 at the beginning of the book) to keep house and manage the farm for *an entire week*.

Yes, it was a different time and culture. Yes, their mother was afraid that they couldn't manage. And yes, they did get into scrapes and mischief! Over the course of the week they:

- Used almost an entire barrel of sugar.
- Procrastinated on the projects they had been assigned.
- Were nearly trampled by horses.
- Quarreled with each other.
- Nearly ruined their mother's parlor.

But full responsibility kicked in with the realization that their parents would be home soon:

*“One morning at breakfast Eliza Jane said:*

*‘Father and Mother will be here tomorrow.’*

*They all stopped eating. The garden had not been weeded. The peas and beans had not been picked, so the vines were ripening too soon. The henhouse had not been whitewashed.*

*'This house is a sight,' Eliza Jane said. 'And we must churn today. But what am I going to tell Mother?'*...

*This was only the beginning of that awful day. They all went to work as hard as they could Royal and Almanzo hoed the garden, they whitewashed the henhouse, they cleaned the cows' stalls and swept the South-Barn Floor. The girls were sweeping and scrubbing in the house. Eliza Jane made Almanzo churn till the butter came, and her hands flew while she washed and salted it and packed it in the tub. There was only bread and butter and jam for dinner, though Almanzo was starved."*

For many adults, it might be easy to look at this story as a perfect example of why children need continual oversight. But while the children did put themselves in terrible situations, they had also been trained well enough to take responsibility and pull themselves out of the hole they had dug. In the end, they came away with strengthened sibling relationships and a better understanding of the hard path which irresponsibility paves.

Given these lessons, would today's parents be wise to train their children to act responsibly and then back off, let them practice it on their own and accept the consequences?

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