

ADVICE TO MINISTER – CONFIDENTIAL ISSUE NOTE

Kids on the bus Sept. 7, 2017

Advice and Recommended response:

- **The ministry completely supports building independence in kids.**
- **It's the role of all parents to support their kids with the guidance, skills and emotional maturity required for a successful adult life.**
- **The ministry – and I, as minister responsible and as a mom and grandmother – would be comfortable with children as young as 10 or even younger riding the bus alone if they are ready, comfortable and capable of doing so.**
- **There are no hard and fast rules here and every circumstance is unique.**
- **So is every kid, which is why parents and the ministry make decisions on what to allow, at what age, based on the young individual and circumstances involved.**
- **Clearly the Ministry does not involve itself when we know about kids riding the bus alone; lots of kids ride the bus alone and safely.**
- **However, when the Ministry receives a child protection concern, we are legislatively obligated to assess it.**
- **And when a young person has been entrusted with not only his or her own safety, but that of a younger child or children, that is again another scenario that must be considered.**
- **Every parent who has had babysitters knows the questions you ask yourself:**
 - **Is this babysitter or older sibling comfortable with the trust and responsibility being given them?**
 - **Do they have the judgement and maturity required to make a safety decision for them and others?**
- **The ministry acts the same way, and social workers ask those same questions.**
- **Again, deciding whether and where it's appropriate to leave a child on his or her own isn't just about age. It's about the particular**

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circumstances in place and – just as crucially – the child’s level of maturity, comfort and sense of safety with the arrangement.

Key Facts Regarding the Issue:

- A father and prominent lifestyle blogger has said he will seek a lawsuit against the ministry over what he sees as unfair treatment at the hands of social workers who ruled that his four children (ages 6-11) could not ride the bus on their own.
- The issue has been covered extensively in the media.
- Many outlets have focused on two letters sent to the father from social workers: one outlining their position following an investigation into complaints around the children being left unattended, and another summarizing certain legal opinions the social workers deemed pertinent to the case.
- Based on segments of these letters the father has shared on his blog and through the media, many members of the public now believe that 10 is the age at which a child may be left unattended and 12 is the age at which a child may supervise other children.
- This is inaccurate and misleading.
- There is no specific age in federal or B.C. legislation, nor is there specific ministerial policy that dictates when a child can be unsupervised.
- Whenever the ministry receives a report that a child has been left unattended, social workers would take steps to assess the child's safety, based on a number of considerations, including:
 - the child's personal views and comfort level with the arrangement;
 - the child's capacity and maturity;
 - how long the child is being left alone;
 - the time of day;
 - the safety measures that are in place;
 - whether there are other children present;
 - whether the child has access to responsible adults and the means to contact his or her parents; and
 - any historical concerns or other factors affecting the family.
- Each and every time the ministry is contacted social workers look into the circumstances, assess the risk to the child (or children) and the parent's ability to provide care, and – based on those findings – take the most appropriate course of action. If social workers determine there is a risk to a child/to children, their first step is to immediately reduce that risk.
- The unique circumstances of each situation determine next steps, which may involve putting services or supports in place to ensure that the health and well-being of the child/children are being addressed.
- Everyone has a duty to report a situation in which a child may be at risk. In assessing the nature of that risk, social workers exercise their professional

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judgement within the parameters established by ministry policy and the *Child, Family and Community Service Act*.

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