

The Buffalo News

Filling the baby sitter gap

By Jane Kwiatkowski
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It's been two months since your sitter left for college, and it's time you found another. But where do you start? Friends and relatives may pinch hit for a while, but you don't want to strain those relationships.

Finding the right person to watch your children may not be as challenging as you think. Many parents use traditional methods — friends' recommendations, community bulletin boards, day care postings — to find their sitters. Others seek sitters with Red Cross certification. And increasingly, parents are choosing to conduct their sitter search online.

Remember, if your sitter is not working out, screen another one. A sitter is a temporary employee, so it's wise to have more than one.

Jen Bernacki Smith lives in Allentown with her husband, Rick, and their two children: Norah, 2, and Gus, 8 weeks. When it comes to baby sitters, they look for college-age women.

"We have lucked out and walked into people who baby-sit for us," said Bernacki Smith, an attorney by profession. "My mother helps, daughters of employees, friends with flexible schedules, daughters of friends."

Daytime sitters are especially hard to find, according to Bernacki Smith, a stay-at-home mom.

"When you want someone during the day, they either have to be unemployed, a student or someone with a flexible work schedule," she said. "A lot of my friends get their sitters from the Web."

Online search

Safety skills, driving record, background check, fee — there are so many variables to consider when hiring a baby sitter that it can make you decide to stay home. But before you rent a movie or order that pizza, you may want to go online.

Online sitting services have become a popular trend across the country and in Buffalo. Sittercity.com, for example, has 500 sitters registered in the Buffalo area and about 400 local parents who have bought into the service. Other Web-based sitter services include:

• www.Babysitters4Hire.com • www.SittersOnStandbyNY.com • www.phoneababysitter.com • www.care.com • www.babysitters.com Online sites connect parents with sitters. Here, parents usually pay a fee while sitters register for free. As a rule, these sites do not screen sitters, although some do offer background checks for an additional fee. The sites feature testimonials from parents, who selected their sitters after viewing their profiles on an online pool, determined geographically by ZIP code.

Consider this testimonial for online baby-sitting from Amy DiMaio, an associate professor from Trocaire College, who has used sittercity.com for two years. The sitter DiMaio chose was a former nanny with infant CPR training and an art background.

“We ended up hiring the second sitter we interviewed, and she is still baby-sitting for us to this day,” DiMaio wrote. “We liked the idea of interviewing a number of sitters, and we based those we decided to interview on their profiles on the Web site.”

In turn, many sitters and nannies go online to market themselves in their communities. Laura Rickard of Williamsville, who has a degree in early childhood education, for example is looking for a nanny position.

“What I like about Sittercity. com is there are all kinds of employment terms available, from once in a while to a weekend getaway,” Rickard said. “I charge \$10 for one child. I do the kids’ wash, dishes of course, and I will clean up after them, but I’m not a cleaning lady — and I’m not a gourmet cook.”

Now consider the concept of “speed sitting,” a Sittercity event that has not visited Buffalo yet, but one that tours the nation, city by city. Similar to speed dating, speed sitting sets several banquet tables, seating parents on one side and sitters on the other. After a brief “meet and greet,” the sitters shift one seat over and the process begins again.

Getting started

“The first thing parents ask is if I have experience,” said Aubrie DiTullio, 12, of Grand Island. “Now I just have experience with my cousin, when my mom went to the store. I went around my neighborhood seeing if I could get a baby-sitting job, and I was asked if I had a certificate. Now I can say I took this class.”

Each year, about 2,500 area boys and girls — ages 11 to 15 — take the 7.25-hour baby sitter certification course offered by the American Red Cross, according to Mark Dashner, Red Cross director of health and safety. One of the most popular classes offered by the Red Cross, it was recently updated to focus on leadership challenges and includes interview tips, resume writing and a safety-issue checklist for the sitters to use on the job.

“We encourage the students to start out as ‘mother’s helpers’ rather than to jump right into baby-sitting,” said Jim Moxon, who has been teaching the course since 2001. “Their maturity levels vary greatly. Eleven-year-olds are still learning about life, whereas the 14-year-olds take to the information more easily.”

During a recent Red Cross class offered at Grand Island High School, a group of six girls listened closely as instructor Moxon introduced the chapter on emergencies.

“What are some ways to recognize an emergency?” Moxon asked.

“Choking,” responded Zaida Smith, 13, who then turned the tables on Moxon by asking this question: “What happens if you get hurt, you’re unconscious and are baby-sitting a 9-month old?”

“Call 911 when you come to,” responded Moxon.

The certificate received upon completion of this Red Cross training class is one credential sought by many parents when interviewing prospective sitters.

“You have to be at least 16 to get a job at the grocery store,” said Zaida, who advertises in her neighborhood by passing out fliers. “Baby-sitting is a way for younger kids to make money.”

An Expert's Checklist

Screening prospective sitters can be time consuming, and is only half the battle. After the hire, too, it is important for parents to keep their eyes and ears open. Here are some tips from former baby sitter and frequent “Today” show guest Genevieve Thiers, founder of Sittercity.com.

Interviews: “When you’re doing a sitter interview, the sitter should be asking you more questions than you’re asking them. She should be working down a question list of her own. One of the key things I found in jobs that don’t work out is that there is a lack of energy. If she doesn’t have excitement with you, she’s not going to have it with your kid.”

The right age: “Very often when you’re getting a high school sitter, they may be great and very mature, but they often can’t drive. Plus, there’s a huge rise in extracurricular activities at that age. To me, college sitters are the best because they usually can drive in case of an emergency, and they generally have more free time, which is surprising, but they do.”

Monitoring: “Talk to your kids. Talk to the sitter. Talk to the neighbors. I think parents turn straight to a nanny cam when they are concerned. You don’t have to do that.”

Friends and relatives plan: “The only pitfall is that if your mom is sitting, sometimes she will do it her way. So if you’re using a different style than your parents, you have to communicate your concerns. Bottom line? If you think the family member will do a good job and you can live with it, use the family member — especially right now when we’re sort of in a recession.”

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