

## Baby-sitting turns pro

### No longer just a first job, sitting for kids turns pro

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October 12, 2008 6:00 AM

Baby-sitting isn't a job just for the teenager down the street anymore.

And if it is, that teen may want to be treated more like an employee than a neighborhood kid.

"It's a whole new world. (Sitting) is not the way it used to be," says Genevieve Thiers, founder and CEO of Sittercity.com, a national networking site that connects parents with sitters and nannies.

One of the most noticeable changes, Thiers says, is the transition of baby-sitting from an after-school pastime and a preteen's or teen's first job to a professional career that's flourishing among sitters age 17 and up who learn to deal with nontraditional situations or lifestyles.

Plug in the Hyannis ZIP code to Sittercity's search for baby sitters or nannies, for example, and you get a list of more than 2,000 names within 50 miles — the first 30 of which are sitters who live within nine miles of the village and range in age from 17 to 64.

Sitter Solutions, a Cape-based baby-sitting agency, employs about 35 per-diem sitters for locals and vacationers, working frequently with Chatham Bars Inn. All its employees have a high school diploma, background checks, first-aid training and multiple references.

Sitters "really aren't showing up in sweats anymore," Thiers says. "They're really treating baby-sitting more like a professional job."

And that holds true for many teens, too.

While Sittercity lists only baby sitters over age 18, Karen Whiting, director of health and safety at the Cape Cod and Islands chapter of the American Red Cross, says the business side of baby-sitting is taught to even the youngest sitters.

In addition to discussing child first aid and safety, baby-sitting classes for future sitters ages 11 to 15, offered at the chapter's Hyannis office and Cape Cod Children's Museum in Mashpee, are now teaching students how "to look upon it as a business rather than as (being) a care-taking assistant," she says.

Students "are taught a lot about responsibility," she says, including how to conduct an interview and how to get and keep jobs.

## NEED FOR SECURITY

Alissa Hufnagel, co-owner of Sitter Solutions with sister Ashley, turned the professional side of sitting into her career, creating the agency based on her experiences with cautious parents at nanny jobs. Besides offering the background and reference checks and first-aid training, to assuage parents' unease, Sitter Solutions has employees bring medical release forms to every job and forbids them to administer medications and drive with children.

Security measures such as these are "essential in this day and age," says Hufnagel, referencing cases of abuse at baby-sitting jobs and day-care centers across the country. "More and more crazy, weird things have happened."

Thiers started her company in Boston in 2001 as a way to allow sitters and families to post profiles. Interested parties can set up baby-sitting and nanny jobs by contacting sitters who look like a good match. With 22 corporate employees now, the site lists more than 1 million caregiver profiles nationwide. Other Web sites — including Babysitters4hire.com, Phoneababysitter.com and Babysitters.com — also offer localized connections to sitters.

## **WAGE SCALE**

As the level of professionalism and security has increased in the baby-sitting world, so has the level of pay for many sitters.

Noting that minimum wage is \$8, Whiting says the teens and preteens who take the Red Cross classes generally are paid from \$6 to \$12 per hour, with the wide range due to their age, the number of children, the duties involved, the time of day and other factors. She says younger sitters are generally paid between \$6 and \$10 per hour, while high-schoolers might earn up to \$12 per hour.

Concerned that there was no standard pay rate for baby sitters in the past, Thiers says sitters through her agency now often offer a standard rate up front. Parents then have the option of going online to find average pay rates for their area.

SitterCity's rate calculator ([http://babysitters.sittercity.com/rate\\_calculator](http://babysitters.sittercity.com/rate_calculator)) bases its pay scale on a sitter's age and years of experience, proximity to a city, the number of children involved, and the type of job (whether it's an overnight, an event, or other factors).

For example, for a two-child sitting job in Hyannis, the rate calculator estimates a per-hour rate of \$12.50 for a sitter age 17 to 21 with two years of experience. In Chatham, the sitter would make \$13.25, and in Bourne, the rate is \$12.25.

## **BIG PAYOFF**

Katie Patellos, 19, of Marstons Mills has been a mother's helper since age 10 and a baby sitter since age 12, and charges \$12 to \$15 per hour. "My rate is pretty much standard," she says.

While working for Sitter Solutions this past summer, Patellos made \$12 per hour and was allowed to accept tips, netting \$50 extra during one weekend-long job.

Pay also should reflect a family's special circumstances, says Thiers. In her newly published book on new issues in sitting, "Love at First Sit," Thiers states that baby sitters who care for special-needs children often make \$1 to \$2 more per hour, and each meal prepared should net the sitter a bit more, too.

The payoff of increased rates, Thiers says, can be huge.

"The long and short of it is that if you and your baby sitter are comfortable with an agreed-upon rate, life is good," she says. "With the right preparation ... you'll have a well-acclimated baby sitter who, before long, you might just consider a part of the family."

Staff writer Kathi Scrizzi Driscoll contributed to this story.

## Parent pointers

Ask these questions first to find the right sitter for your family:

- Do you have first aid training? Sitters should know basic first aid, CPR and the Heimlich maneuver. If they don't, they should be willing to attend a (possibly employer-funded) first aid class.
- What's your experience level? A sitter's age doesn't determine her experience. Sitters who start young can rack up years of experience despite still being in high school.
- What are your theories on discipline? TV shows such as "Nanny 911" and "Supernanny" give sitters a variety of ideas for dealing with misbehaving children. Find out what your sitter thinks of your discipline techniques.
- What is your lifestyle like? Asking about a sitter's ideas on fitness, nutrition and appropriate activities can help parents decide whether a McDonald's-loving, couch-potato sitter would fit with their vegetarian, soccer-fanatic kids. You want to be sure you click.

Sources: Sittercity.com, Sitter Solutions