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By Daniel Jackson

Baby-sitting Inc. - the Job Getting Turned Over to Adults

Gastonia resident Leslie Strader gets to bring her 2-year-old son to work on weekends, when she's paid to keep an eye on two other children at her client's home.

The 34-year-old stay-at-home mom said she started baby-sitting after her son was born to earn extra money. But when her son turns 3, Strader said she may be the one paying a baby-sitter. Strader said she loves baby-sitting, but she is considering going back to a traditional 9 to 5.

Faced with lay offs or lower wages, more parents are spending more time at home with their children, said Strader, who finds work through www.sittercity.com. And more people are looking for baby-sitting jobs to make ends meet, Strader said.

"It's already getting thick out there with the competition," Strader said. "I'd thought about going back into the work force when he turns 3."

Until recently, Strader said her services easily earned her an average of \$10 an hour, but that changed. Strader said she's cut her rates in half to get sitting gigs.

A growing number of families are turning to baby-sitting swaps to reduce what they pay sitters. To be sure, parents have partnered to share the load of child care for years, but the economy has broadened the appeal. Traditional baby-sitters say business is down and some offer to work for lower rates to encourage parents seeking savings during the recession to use their services.

"I've had to scale back my rate to make it more comfortable for parents that can't afford to put them in day care," Strader said. "I look at it as helping someone else."

Gary Myers of Smart Mom's Babysitting Co-op says the lingering economic downturn triggered a spike in requests for a free guide that his Tacoma, Wash.-based group offers to parents seeking to set up new groups. Traffic on his Web site has also doubled. In a co-op, participating parents don't exchange money, but they sometimes earn points for child care that can be used to obtain those same services from another member of the group.

“Most moms have one or two people that are good friends, that are sitters, and a co-op is just like having 10 or 12,” Myers said. “The important thing for a mom is that her kids are watched, and are safe and it's a good care environment.”

One person in Gaston County has registered a community at the sitter co-op Web site www.babysitterexchange.com, but so far no other members have joined. Another community in the Denver area has five members.

Strader said she's never received any offers to trade baby-sitting services, but said she would definitely be interested trading for quality child care in a safe environment, especially if she ends up finding a new job.

“That's something I am interested in, depending on what hours or shifts I work,” she said. “I think this is a real good job to have ... But with the economy the way it is, it stinks.”

On the Web:

Find a sitter ...

www.sittercity.com

“ ... ”

Find or start a co-op ...

www.babysittingcoop.com

www.babysittingcoop.com/startup.pdf

www.babysitterexchange.com