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It takes some homework to find a good baby sitter

A good local map or guidebook will tell you where to find the schools, the parks and possibly even the grocery stores in a new town. The newcomers' club might be able to recommend an electrician or a dry-cleaner. But when it comes to finding a baby sitter, most parents don't know where to start when they move to a new house.

The obvious first step is to look to your family, advises Genevieve Thiers, founder and president of Sittercity.com, a Web site featuring a database of baby sitters that can be broken down further by allergies, schedule, holiday availability and other specific criteria.

Thiers, the oldest of 7 children who was often called on to baby-sit, says relatives are often the most comfortable choice for the parents, the sitters and the children who need to be watched.

The potential pitfall, however, is that the sitters are too comfortable in the house and will invite friends over, chat on the phone too long or be too permissive with the kids, according to Thiers.

"With family, you have to make sure the sitter realizes that this is a job, whether they are being paid or not. You have to impress upon relatives that they really are in charge," according to Thiers. "Some people pay their relatives just to reinforce the idea that this is a job."

If there are no nieces, nephews or older siblings to fill the baby sitter position, Thiers suggests parents go on a two-prong neighborhood canvas: ask friends about potential sitters and take stock of the children who live nearby.

And, Thiers adds, don't discount boys. "Don't limit your sitter search to girls, especially if you have sons. A boy might be better suited to playing with your son."

The next places for parents to take their sitter search are local high schools and colleges, where career services offices and student newspapers can be particularly helpful, and the Internet.

In addition to Sittercity, which features Boston, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Seattle, Dallas and Cleveland and Akron, Ohio, parents can also visit the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies online and its affiliated Web site called Child Care Aware.

Child Care Aware has a "connector," which will suggest names of local child-care providers based on ZIP codes. The service is targeted toward long-term day-care solutions but in some cases there are suggestions for drop-in caregivers as well.

The local partners can provide important information that parents might not initially think to ask about, such as the child-adult ratio at a day-care center and staff turnover, says Karen Heying, outreach and implementation manager for Child Care Aware.

But, Heying adds, nothing replaces an in-person meeting between the caregiver and parent - and the child.

"The relationship between provider and parent is very important ... but the personality of the child has to match the provider," she says.

Thiers also says that a sitter should have more questions than the parent during an interview. Sitter should ask about sleeping routines, eating, allergies, television viewing, bath time and where the fire extinguisher is located.

"You want a sitter who won't be afraid to ask questions and make a call to a doctor if they needed to," Thiers says. "You want to look for competence and confidence."

Thiers does, however, have some suggested questions for parents, including:

- What is your prior experience with children - and what were the children's ages?
- Do you know CPR and how to do the Heimlich maneuver?
- Do you have any allergies to pets? (Thiers says this is a question many parents forget to ask and then are faced with a sitter who gets ill while she's in the home.)
- Can you keep calm in a crisis? Give examples.
- Do you know the proper size for baby chewables and how to prevent choking?
- Can you identify or create a childproofed room?