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**By Jennifer Lefferts**

## **Make Plans NOW for Sick Child or Snow Days**

If you haven't lined up child care for the school year, it is not time to panic, at least not yet. But working moms and dads should start looking now to avoid the added stress that comes along with an already hectic time of year for families.

While some popular programs, particularly group activities sponsored by schools and YMCAs are filling up quickly, there are still many options out there for working parents who need child care before school & after school, and those unexpected days when the snow storm hits or the kids come down with another pesky cold.

YMCAs operate a variety of programs for school-aged children, some starting as early as 7 a.m. and ending as late as 6 p.m. Most are also open on snow days, early release days, and school vacations.

Pam Suprenant, associate executive director of the YMCA of Greater Worcester, Central Community Branch, said the programs are already filling up quickly though they try to accommodate everyone who walks through the door.

She said the branch started taking applications for the 2007-08 school year in April and already two of its eight sites are booked.

The Y operates the programs in schools and at the branch location, working closely with the school department on transportation, which is often a barrier for parents, Suprenant said.

Suprenant said the Y is special because not only are kids being cared for but they are learning and having fun all at the same time. They take part in science projects, cooking, go on field trips among other activities.

"They are immersed in educational activities but the child has no idea," she said. "We're all about play and all about movement and getting exercise."

The school-based programs are not held in schools on snow days, so kids are allowed to spend the day at the Y. Suprenant said the kids love snow days - school is out and they have access to all the branch facilities including the pool and rock climbing wall.

Sick time is another story, though, and those days can pile up quickly for parents during the winter.

That's where Parents in a Pinch can come to the rescue. Parents in a Pinch is a Brookline-agency serving Greater Boston that will provide sitters to parents who are, in a pinch. Parents call up the agency, request a sitter for a certain day and time and the sitter, trained and screened by the agency, will arrive.

Barbara Marcus, chief executive officer of Parents in a Pinch, said the agency's sitters will care for mildly sick children. She said the service can be a lifesaver for parents with children new to school, who tend to catch every cold and bug.

Marcus said the agency serves private families and also contracts with companies, who offer the service to their employees.

Marcus said some parents call in advance if they know they'll need a sitter on a certain day or can call last-minute. In most cases, there isn't time for the parents and sitter to meet in person, however, Marcus said the parents will receive a biography and can talk to the sitter on the phone.

"People use us very creatively," Marcus said. "We've had stay-at-home moms call us when they're sick so mom can get some sleep. We've had grandma call us when the grandchildren come to town and they're a little more work than expected."

Attorney Lucy Wall, a parent of two from Lexington, said she and her husband, also a lawyer, have traditionally stockpiled their sick days for the winter months so one of them can stay home with the sick kids.

It's not always easy though, Wall said. On her first day at a new job, one of her daughters was sick with a mild case of pneumonia. Not wanting to call in sick her first day on the job, Wall called her mother, who traveled from New York for the day. She then took off her second day of work.

Wall said she's now at a point where she can take the time to be at home when her kids are sick but she knows others aren't as lucky.

"I don't know how people do it if they don't have that flexibility," Wall said.

For afterschool care, Wall said she has used school-based programs and a babysitter. Her babysitter is no longer available though, so she's not sure what she'll do this September.

"I'm always looking for more sources," said Wall, who has found babysitters using online sites such as [www.sittercity.com](http://www.sittercity.com) and Craig's List.

Online search sites such as [Sittercity.com](http://Sittercity.com) are becoming an increasingly popular way for parents to find babysitters. Once signing up to the site, parents have two options - they

can post a job detailing exactly what they need out of a babysitter and the posting will be blasted out to all participating sitters in a 50-mile radius. Or they can search the site's database for local babysitters who have posted profiles.

Parents can choose a basic search by typing in their zip code. This will display all babysitters in the area. The results can be sorted based their proximity and last time they logged onto the site.

By typing in the Fitchburg area code of 01420, for example, the site listed 740 potential babysitters within about a 20-mile radius.

Sittercity also offers an advanced search, allowing parents to select from a variety of criteria. Parents can find sitters who speak certain languages, are available certain days and times, work with special needs children, do laundry, drive the kids around, live within five miles, don't smoke, don't mind pets, or are even willing to take care of sick children.

"Sittercity lets you get ultra detailed in what you're looking for," said Boston College graduate Genevieve Thiers, founder and chief executive officer of Sittercity. "It's like entering babysitter nirvana."

Thiers, a former babysitter who started the site in 2001, said safety has been the top priority since the beginning. The site recommends a four-step screening process that includes checking references, checking the sitter's online feedback, interviewing the sitter, and conducting a background check.

**TIPS for parents:**

- If you're choosing an after-school program, visit the site.
- Screen the sitter - conduct an in-person interview, check references and do a background check.
- If you're posting a job online, know when sitters are looking for jobs. According to sittercity.com, one of the best times is the late summer when college students know their schedules for the semester.
- Sittercity.com also suggests being greedy - pick three sitters instead of one so you always have a backup when your favorite sitter isn't available.
- Determine fair pay. Sittercity points out that just because your neighbor pays \$15 an hour for four rowdy kids doesn't mean you should pay the same for your easy-to-please only child.