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Baby sitter search clicks with parents

Melissa Hem of Needham once posted ads at local colleges and even paid a Boston nanny agency nearly \$2,000 to find baby sitters for her two young daughters. Now, she just gets on the Internet and picks sitters from a website.

"They're essentially taking a chore that was really difficult to manage and making it efficient and seamless for the user," said Hem, who says she has found five or six baby sitters through the site in recent years.

Hem is just one of many residents of Boston's suburbs who are using the Web to find baby sitters on sites such as Sittercity.com. On the site, sitters can post their desired qualifications – CPR-certified, nonsmoker, has a car, etc. – and personal details about themselves for free. Parents pay \$40 to register. For another \$5 a month, they can browse through sitters' profiles and send messages to those who appear to be good matches.

The company, launched by a Boston College graduate in 2001, says it has more than 150,000 baby sitters registered across the nation, including 4,500 in Greater Boston.

Babysitters.com, a competing site, requires a \$40 initial fee and \$8.95 a month from parents who want to search profiles of sitters in their area and contact them if they're interested in an interview. Around 150 Boston-area sitters are registered with the site.

College students hungry for extra cash and eager to make work fit into sometimes odd class and study schedules are one of the driving forces behind such babysitting clearinghouses, said Genevieve Thiers, founder of Sittercity.com.

With rates running from \$10 to \$15 an hour and even higher, depending on experience and qualifications, baby-sitting isn't just a job for teenyboppers anymore.

Thiers, a Brookline native, said that for many students, the appeal of baby-sitting is simple.

"What it comes down to is the money is there," said Thiers, who babysat her way through BC, managing to pay off a good chunk of her tuition with the money she earned.

"Not only is this a legitimate industry, but there's a huge amount of money in it," she said.

Some parents still are likely to question the safety of inviting strangers that they've contacted via the Internet into their homes.

Thiers says that since it started operating, Sittercity.com hasn't come across a safety problem related to any of the sitters registered with the site. Sittercity.com is careful to point out that the company does not screen baby sitters, but the site does offer guidelines on how parents should screen candidates.

It recommends that parents conduct a face-to-face interview, check references, and do online background checks. The site requires sitters to provide at least one reference with an e-mail address and phone number.

"Every family has a different comfort level, and we want to make sure they have the tools they need," said Becca Keaty, director of marketing for Sittercity.com.

Genevieve Michelle Fagnano, director of prevention services for the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, said she had never heard of a problem related to baby sitters who were found online. But she also said parents need to keep their guard up.

The Internet may be a good starting point, but Fagnano cautioned that parents must take the same screening stems when they select a baby sitter through online services as they would if they found somebody through an advertisement posted at a local Laundromat. That means checking several references and having a phone or, preferably, a face-to-face interview before hiring.

She said some parents, overworked and pressed for time, don't take all the precautions they should.

"Quite frankly, families are more willing to look up Consumer Reports and see which car is the safest as opposed to spending the time...checking out the person who's going to be caring for their children," she said.

Rebecca Miller, a Newton resident who used Sittercity.com for three years, said the service has changed her life.

"I discovered I could find lots and lots of the kinds of people I was looking for, and I could find them in a way that was proactive, instead of sitting back and waiting," she said.

Check it out

Sittercity.com suggests the following basic safety steps for parents who would like to hire a baby sitter they find on baby sitter Internet clearinghouses:

1. Call a couple of the sitter's references.

2. Check feedback on the sitter that other parents have posted on the Web. Sittercity.com sets up profiles of sitters that allow parents to comment on their experiences. (It also offers baby sitters' comments on parents.)
3. Interview the candidate.
4. Consider doing a background check on the baby sitter before you hire.