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By Ken Wilan

Speedsitting: The Fastest Route to Child Care **Variation on speed dating hooks up parents and sitters in minutes**

Lauren Kavanaugh, an attorney at Liberty Mutual in Boston, was out of the office and on a mission.

Kavanaugh, 38, had told colleagues, "I'm at a meeting." But what she was really doing at Red Sky Restaurant near Quincy Market, far from her Back Bay office, was meeting at five-minute intervals with a host of mostly younger women, getting to know them as quickly as possible to decide if she would call them later.

"I've had a very difficult time finding baby sitters," said Kavanaugh, who has a 1-year-old son. "It's a huge time suck, and my husband and I work full time."

So Kavanaugh joined 30 other parents and 40 baby sitters in a "Speedsitting" session, where a parent interviews a sitter for five minutes before moving on to the next sitter. The line of sitters and parents stretched along opposite sides of pushed-together tables running the length of the restaurant. During lunch hour, these parents, many with notepads in hand, grilled sitters and took names.

"What is the thing we can't supply parents right now?" asked Genevieve Thiers, CEO and founder of Sittercity.com, an online company that matches parents with baby sitters and was sponsoring the event. "We couldn't supply parents with face-to-face interaction." Speedsitting, she said, is "basically a speed date, but for parents and baby sitters."

Natalia Sarkisian, assistant professor of sociology at Boston College, said it should come as no surprise that such events are taking place. "Speed dating has created a fad - now it is speed-everything," she said.

The number of couples that both work and put a child in child care at an early age is increasing, said Fred Rothbaum, professor of child development at Tufts University and president of the Child & Family WebGuide, which screens parenting resources. The Speedsitting concept, Rothbaum said, is a natural extension of the Internet-fueled trend to deliver more information and goods faster.

"Given the time crunch, parents, and especially mothers, are trying to find top-quality child care and are trying to be more efficient and maximize their options. Parents want to

survey as many child-care providers as possible to say, 'I have done my best,' " said Sarkisian. Speedsitting combines technology - the baby sitters are already registered on the sittercity.com database - with the no-tech approach.

"The benefit is face-to-face contact," said Anna Nivala, 31, of Somerville, holding 11-month-old Evie. "It's a first impression, and how do they look at my daughter?" Evie offered up bright smiles to just about everyone in the restaurant - baby sitters, bartenders, and a reporter included.

As the caregivers sipped baby-girl-pink nonalcoholic cocktails topped off with an orange wedge, parents shifted seats in five-minute spurts recalling musical chairs, in this case not wanting to be left out of finding the perfect sitter. Though there were more sitters than parents, competition for the best of the bunch can be stiff.

"It's supply and demand; there's more people looking for child care," and not necessarily a proportional rise in accessible child care out there, said Rothbaum.

"Once you find a good baby sitter, they're a very prized possession," said Scott Shannon, 48, who with his wife, Anne, was looking for a sitter for their 4-year-old son, Shane. "People don't share sitters, they don't want to lose them." And, he reasoned, the sitters at the event were the cream of the crop. Online, he said, sitters "don't always respond, or respond and say 'not interested.' Here, candidates are more mature and a lot more serious about being sitters or nannies. They're taking time out in their day" to be here.

The Shannons, of Dedham, were looking for a sitter because Scott was returning to the workforce as a construction project manager.

"He's currently a stay-at-home mom," said Anne, 45, who had taken the day off from work as director of energy programs at Quincy Community Action Programs to search for a sitter.

"Dad," Scott corrected.

Shannon was one of two fathers in a sea of mothers. The other was Malay Kundu, founder of StopLift Vision Systems in Bedford. He and his wife, who also works full time and had a full day of meetings, have a 4-year-old son and an 8-month-old daughter.

"With my long hours, I certainly contribute to the need for baby sitters," Kundu said.

Did it make him feel awkward that he was one of the few men at the event?

"I don't really care, I just need to get a baby sitter," he replied, echoing the sentiment of most parents at the event. He then darted to an empty seat across from a sitter to begin his next interview before he had to get back to work.