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By Jennifer Heldt Powell

Babysitting in Web Land

The age of the Internet has made it easier than ever for parents to find good sitters for their children.

But parents beware.

It's also easier than ever for sickos and fraudsters to find their way into your home.

Babysitters should be equally cautious as they scour the Web for work.

It's like Internet dating. When it works, it's great.

Steven Gordon is raising two children on his own after his wife died. He works full time and goes to law school at night, leaving him little time to find a babysitter to give him a much-needed break.

On Craigslist, the popular Internet classified ad site, he found a babysitter who his children really like. But it wasn't easy.

Twice, potential babysitters skipped initial meetings, leaving him trying to explain to his kids why they didn't show. Other sitters expressed an interest but then left him hanging. He wonders if it's because he's a single father.

Kate Morris came to Boston from out-of-town to attend college. She missed spending time with kids, but didn't know where to turn to find families who might hire her, until she found Sittercity.com. Founded in Boston, the site matches sitters with families.

She found several jobs through the site and still babysits even though she has graduated and works full time.

But as with online dating, you never know for sure who you'll find. There's no one screening the sitters or the families and there's no one regulating the listings.

Earlier this year, the Arizona Republic reported that a babysitter accused of molesting a 3-year-old had been hired via the Internet.

You need to use common sense, says Sittercity.com founder Genevieve Thiers. Parents pay a fee to search the site for sitters, who post their resumes for free.

“We’ll make it easy for you to screen them, but you have to screen them,” Thiers said.

The site offers numerous suggestions on how to screen people and how to run an interview.

Thiers said her business, which she launched in Boston four years ago, is growing briskly as more parents become computer savvy.

But unsavory characters are also computer savvy.

Davida Manon – who founded Parents in a Pinch, a babysitting and nanny agency that screens babysitters – said she’s seen listings online by potential workers who her agency rejected.

“It’s inexpensive,” Manon said about the online listings. “But there’s a certain risk that people aren’t screened.”

In contrast, her agency has 21 years of experience weeding through candidates. They also do follow-up work to check on sitters.

Parents who opt to do it themselves should be careful regardless of how they find a potential sitter, said Dena Papanikolaou, general counsel for the state department of Early Education and Care.

“You should ask a lot of questions and trust your instincts,” she said.

Meet with candidates and watch them interact with your children, Papanikolaou suggested. Check references and consider running a criminal background check, which can be done by the state for a small fee with the candidate’s permission.