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By Lauren Beckham Falcone

Nanny Diaries

Net babysitting match service takes page from speed dating

Mary Poppins is the new Prince Charming.

And she's just as hard to find, which is why dozens of desperate parents went "speed sitting" in Boston yesterday.

Like speed dating without the cocktails and push-up bras, speed sitting allows parents to interview prospective sitters for five minutes before a bell signals it's time to move on to the next nanny. Sponsored by the child-care matching service sittercity.com, the event provided parents with about 50 sitters looking for full- and part-time work.

"I have three kids and I'm just looking for the occasional Saturday-night sitter," said Cindy Janoweo of Newton. "It's better to be able to meet face to face. I mean, online you don't know if you're getting Darth Vader."

True, but speed sitting isn't for the faint of heart - or wallet.

First up was Michele, a 53-year-old tutor with 25 years of teaching experience and a certificate in massage therapy. Jackpot! Watch the kids by day, give mom a backrub at night. But some scoffed at her price - \$20 an hour. For the babysitting, not the massage.

And 47-year-old Sheri was equally expensive. In fact, if speed dating is Cinderella on caffeine, then speed sitting is Goldilocks on Red Bull. It's hard to find "just right."

"One of the key things is that we've made finding a sitter online as safe as can be," said Genevieve Thiers, founder of sittercity.com, which has more than 150,000 registered sitters nationwide and a half-million users. "We have a four-step screening process and background checks. When people think of online, they think of MySpace [website]. This isn't like that."

Thiers was a Boston College student and frequent babysitter when she saw got the idea for an online sitter-parent matching service. She launched [sittercity](http://sittercity.com) in Boston in 2001. Now based in Chicago, the service is expected to rake in \$3 million to \$5 million in sales this year.

And sittercity.com isn't just for babies anymore. The site launched a pet-sitting service this summer.

As for the nannies, they found yesterday's speedy intros were a great way to market themselves.

"Meeting someone in person isn't as cold as the Internet," said sitter Giane Marques (Malden, six years' experience, \$15 to \$18 an hour). "I think I found a few families that might work."