



September 25, 2005
By Heather V. Eng

The Parent Trap: Mom and Dad on high-tech search for help

To find the right person, they're scouring Internet profiles, searching local newspapers and networking through friends.

They're not Boston singles looking for dates. They're Boston parents on the hunt for babysitters.

"It really, really is [difficult]," said Elena Olson of Brookline, a health-care administrator at Massachusetts General Hospital and mother of two sons, 7 and 9. "I wish I had the magic answer."

With the summer ending, many parents find themselves without childcare, as their regular sitters move away to college or return to school schedules. Finding a new sitter is no longer as easy as asking the teenage neighbor to watch the kids. Working parents often need sitters to commit to a set weekly schedule. Add that to finding someone reliable, trustworthy and able to relate to the kids, and the search often feels like an impossible quest.

"When you find a good sitter, you never want to give up that sitter – they're like gold," said Ellen Epstein of Chestnut Hill, a self-employed mother of two sons, 2 and 4.

Today's parents, such as Olson and Epstein, have to go through many channels to find sitters. They employ traditional search methods, such as asking for word-of-mouth recommendations and placing ads at local colleges, and supplement that by using Internet Web sites.

While attending Boston College, Genevieve Thiers, founder and CEO of Sittercity.com, noticed the difficulties parents had in finding someone to watch their kids. As the oldest of seven children, Thiers babysat since childhood and picked up a few sitter gigs after moving to Boston in 1996. Her client roster eventually grew to more than 30 families, as parents referred her to their friends.

The Web site, launched in 2001, could be called the Match.com of babysitting. Sitters register for free and post their profiles. Parents pay \$39.99 for the first month and \$5 for each following month and can place ads and search for sitters in their area. Sittercity.com does not screen profiles, but the site offers guidelines for checking references and

conducting interviews. Currently, Sittercity.com has more than 100,000 registered babysitters across the country.

[Ellen Epstein], the mother from Chestnut Hill, used Sittercity.com after friends recommended it to her. Despite one negative experience with a prospective sitter, Epstein said the Web site has helped her in her search.

“My initial impression wasn’t positive, but following that, I’ve met some really exceptional women through Sittercity,” Epstein said.

Olson, the Brookline mother, has also placed postings on Sittercity.com and Craigslist.org. Though she received many responses to her ads, she has yet to find the right person who can accommodate her schedule.

“I’m always amazed at how many people don’t read your needs. They just call,” she said.

Both mothers noted there is no best way to find a sitter, other than by utilizing every possible search method.

“So much of it is luck,” Olson said.

Kate Schulze, a 23-year-old sitter from New Jersey looking for full-time a nannying position in Massachusetts, noted that parents are rightfully choosy in selecting a sitter.

“It’s good pay and it should be, because (children) are their (parents’) most precious possessions,” Schulze said.