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Where Did All the Baby Sitters Go?

As a new mother, Aliza Sherman-Risdahl hired her first baby sitter last fall when her daughter was 3 months old. Instead of relying on traditional word of mouth to get names, she turned to two less conventional sources: the Internet and the university newspaper in Anchorage, Alaska, where she and her husband live.

"I've found four good sitters this way," she says.

What could be called the great baby-sitter shortage is leading some parents to consider creative new ways to search for reliable help. The standard low-tech and personal connection - typically a telephone call to a neighborhood teenager - is gradually going high-tech. Using everything from Craigslist to baby-sitting websites, e-mail, and even MySpace pages, parents are going online and clicking their way to a sitter for Saturday night.

For Ms. Sherman-Risdahl, an Internet consultant, the process begins by posting a classified ad on Craigslist. "I ask for their resume," she says. "I'm very specific in my ads that they must have experience with infants and they must have their own transportation. If their resume looks good, I talk to them on the phone. If they sound good, I meet them at a bookstore or cafe. I meet them with my baby because I want to see how they interact. If I like that, I ask for references and call them. I have to act as fast as I can. There's such demand here."

Some desperate parents resort to other means. "There's a lot of sitter-napping and stealing top sitters [from friends]," says Bethany Sirt of SitterCity.com, an Internet baby-sitting service.

Lauren Shaham of Silver Spring, Md., who still relies on phone calls to hire baby sitters, knows all about shortages. "We often have to call as many as 10 teenagers or young adults to find a baby sitter," she says. "It's discouraging that it takes such effort to find one."

She considers the social changes contributing to the shortage. "Baby-sitting is less a rite of passage today than 25 years ago, when I used to do it," she says. "All of my friends did some amount of baby-sitting when we were in high school and appreciated the income."

That was at \$1.50 an hour. Now teenagers are just so busy, with rigorous academic schedules and a range of extracurricular activities. They're not all that interested in baby-sitting, and they don't need the money that much."

Robin Gorman Newman of Great Neck, N.Y., cofounder of Motherhoodlater.com, used e-mail to search for someone to care for her preschool son. "I did an e-mail blast to people I know locally," she says. "I went after networker types." Her efforts paid off.

For Lisa Earle McLeod, an author and mother of two in Atlanta, the Internet offers another way to check out a baby sitter: She looks at the teenager's MySpace page. "Colleges are doing that now - Googling applicants and seeing what their MySpace page looks like," she says. "With the Internet, there's really no place to hide."

Other parents are turning to online baby-sitting services. Some are small and regional. Others, such as Care.com and SitterCity.com, are national. Providers can describe their background and list their availability free of charge. Parents pay a monthly fee and can request a background check.

"We hand-review each profile," says Sheila Marcelo, president of Care.com. "Providers can post videos of themselves online. It makes it easy for parents to view the videos of the caregivers before they interview them."

Although she calls the Internet "a very efficient way for people to find each other," she adds, "You have to be smart about it, using background checks, screening, references, and interviewing."

One Care.com provider, Amanda Kowitz of Weston, Mass., works full time and baby-sits on weekends. Describing the learning curve some parents face in using online services, she says, "People have interviewed me who have no idea what to ask beyond 'When are you available?' and 'How much do you charge?'"

Some parents, like Ms. Shaham, remain wary of cyberspace connections. "My sister hired a nanny from Craigslist," she says. "But in my experience finding a sitter is still a word-of-mouth thing. That gives people the most comfort. Most of my friends prefer to hire a neighbor."

Some parents even turn to nanny agencies for baby sitters. "Parents today are worried about who they're calling into their home," says Pat Cascio, president of International Nanny Association in Houston.

Whatever means parents use to find sitters, some mothers have a domestic complaint. "It's always the wife's job to get the sitter," says Ms. McLeod. "Women say, 'My husband always wants to go out, but I've got to get a sitter two weeks in advance.'"

Setting a good example is Phillip Tree, a father of five in Grosse Pointe, Mich. Last October, when he and his wife went out to celebrate her birthday, he made arrangements for the sitter.

In addition to the challenge of baby sitters' availability, some parents face another issue: affordability. Costs average between \$10 and \$15 an hour nationally, Marcelo says.

"Even going to the movies now is a \$50 night for us, between the movie, the baby-sitting, and popcorn," says Shaham, who pays \$8 to \$10 an hour for a sitter. "We're more likely to stay home on a Saturday evening."

Joni Kirk of Moscow, Idaho, agrees. "We don't go out much anymore, which we desperately need," she says. "On occasion we'll take the kids. Time out for dinner alone will add another \$15 to \$20 to our bill."

But including children doesn't always work. "Whenever we take our baby with us out to dinner, it's just constant care," says Sherman-Risdahl. "When we have our date night, we can relax."

Even those who find the current fees daunting understand the economics. "These people are taking care of our most precious resources: our children," Ms. Kirk says. "We should be willing to pay to have that care given."