

June 14, 2006

Ken Dilanian

Speed sitting helps parents find a child care match

On a recent Saturday, about a dozen sharply dressed Philadelphia-area parents sat on one side of a long, narrow banquet table, facing a line of college-casual young women (and one young man) who were selling their services as baby-sitters.

After five minutes of interaction, a bell rang, and each parent moved down one chair to the next sitter-in-waiting, notebook in hand. Other parents stood in line for a free seat, munching pizza as they waited. Those who brought kids had already released them to an impromptu playground -- the organizers had thought of everything.

You've heard of speed dating? This was speed sitting. And if you've ever struggled to find a good baby-sitter (as most parents have at one time or another), you probably see the allure.

"I need a sitter who is not just a warm body," said Mary Kay Bergen, as she looked over the crop of fresh-faced sitters at the event, in Wayne, Pa. "These people all seem to be really energetic."

Sadly, this was a one-time-only thing -- there is no speed-sitting club for parents to join. The free speed-sitting event was merely a gimmick, designed to promote what is perhaps an even more efficient venue for finding a baby-sitter: Sittercity.com, a Web site that, for \$40 upfront and \$5 per month, grants you access to the profiles of child-care workers in your area.

Company founder Genevieve Thiers, 28, used baby-sitting to help put herself through Boston College. "I'm the oldest of seven kids, so I was baby-sitting basically most of my entire life," she said.

"One day, I saw this pregnant mother walking through campus posting flyers for a sitter, and I thought, 'Oh my God, how desperate do you have to be?'" she said. "Wouldn't it be great if there was a Match.com for child care?"

So in 2001, Thiers built one, starting in Boston, by going door-to-door recruiting baby-sitters on college campuses. These days, she lives in Chicago and has recruited members from across the country -- a total of 150,000 sitter listings and 15,000 parents, Thiers says. Revenues are more than \$1 million, she says, with a staff of just 11.

There are competitors, including 4sitters.com and babysitters.com. Each operates much like a Web dating service, in that the host site doesn't legally vouch for its registered sitters. Sittercity requires a reference from each sitter, and it allows the posting of eBay-style feedback, but it does not, for example, conduct criminal background checks.

"The parents and sitters on our site screen each other," Thiers says.

None of the Wayne, Pa., parents found that disconcerting; many said they would take the same precautions whether they met a baby-sitter through a Web site, friend or flyer.

Rates are between the parent and the sitter. They tend to range between \$10 and \$15 an hour.

Like most Web shopping experiences, Sittercity offers a far larger selection of choices than anyone could possibly come across through word-of-mouth. Want someone with special training? Someone older? Someone with her own means of transport? Someone available on short notice? You can probably find all of that.

The sitters on hand for speed-sitting were mostly college students or recent graduates. Some had day jobs and were looking for extra work on nights and weekends.

Sara Campbell, 23, is completing nursing school. So she's CPR-certified, has worked with special-needs children and has her own car. She won plaudits for coming prepared with a roll of stickers listing her contact information, so parents didn't need to write it down.

"It's great to work with parents who care," she said of the Sittercity members she's encountered.

The next speed-sitting events are scheduled for the Twin Cities and Atlanta, but Thiers does not rule out others; users can check a separate Web site, www.speedsitting.net, to keep tabs.

This group of parents left convinced.

"I thought it was really unique and interesting," said Sandy Nissenbaum, mother of two toddlers. "Speed dating didn't really become popular until after I got married, so I guess this is how I'll have to experience it."