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By Rebecca Baker

Parents struggle to find good baby sitters

Alissa Posner has just one problem with baby sitters.

"I can never find one," the New City mother of two said. "They just seem to be hard to come by."

Posner, whose daughters are 5 and 9, faces a common anxiety among parents of young children in the Lower Hudson Valley: where to find a reliable, trustworthy baby sitter.

The search for the quintessential 16-year-old sitter can be a daunting task. Those lucky enough to find a responsible teen to watch the kids on Saturday night are reluctant to share them, and teenagers who work with kids say there are fewer of them in the baby-sitting circuit because they have so many more demands on their free time.

"In high school, they're more involved in sports and volunteer work and part-time jobs," said Marion Arbuco, assistant director of the Clarkstown Community Center. "I think parents have to turn to kids who are a little younger."

Younger teens and "tweens" are usually available, Arbuco said, and the American Red Cross offers a course to teach them to be responsible baby sitters. Boys and girls as young as 11 can learn how to handle infants, basic first-aid and how to deal with choking children, among other lessons. They get a certificate showing they have completed the course.

At one such recent Red Cross class in White Plains, 13-year-old Daniella Torchia of Ossining learned how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation on an infant.

She said she took the class to learn how to handle emergencies, as she already baby-sits her neighbor's three children.

Torchia said she was baby-sat herself a little more than a year ago, but feels mature enough now to be a baby sitter, in part because she has watched her younger cousins.

"I try to be fun, but safe, and keep things under control," she said.

To some parents, though, 13 is simply not old enough. Posner said she registered for a Red Cross-trained baby sitter some time ago, but didn't feel comfortable hiring the girl.

"I remember thinking, 'She's so young -too young.' I prefer to have someone more mature," she said.

For those who want older sitters, there are Web sites, such as sittercity.com or babysitters.com, that allow subscribers to enter their ZIP code to find sitters nearby. Many of the sitters on such sites are college students and other young women with years of child care experience.

For parents who need a sitter at the last minute, Family Helpers in Dobbs Ferry has a list of screened sitters who are available any time. They are even matched with a child's personality.

Such service isn't cheap. Family Helpers charges \$13 an hour to \$15 an hour for its part-time baby sitters, on top of a \$100 registration fee and a \$10 agency fee.

"It does cost more, but we're working with a client who doesn't mind," said Family Helpers director Susan Tokayer. "You can call us on a Friday and get a baby sitter Friday night. You could never do that with a 16-year-old."

The going rate for sitters is \$10 an hour, said Linda Martin, spokeswoman for the American Red Cross in Westchester.

Catie Conte, a 12-year-old Ossining girl who also took the Red Cross class in White Plains, said she charges \$5 an hour for one child and \$2 more an hour for each additional child.

Lindsey Boyer, a 17-year-old Edgemont girl, makes \$12 an hour watching two boys whose father is friends with her dad. Her wage, she said, is a far cry from the \$5 an hour that her parents had paid her baby sitters just a few years ago. She considers herself lucky.

"It's good to have a job that's fun," she said. "You're making money doing something you like."

Parents who say they've found their ideal baby sitter feel lucky as well.

Alexandra Palombo of White Plains had nothing but praise for her 17-year-old sitter, whom she entrusts with her 3-year-old son and 22-month-old daughter. The girl's older sister was the family's former sitter.

"She comes from a family with four kids," Palombo said about her new sitter. "She was totally experienced with diaper changing and knowing what to anticipate."

Knowing that the 17-year-old will likely leave next year, Palombo has recruited a 13-year-old neighbor girl as a "mother's helper." The younger girl watches the boy and girl when they're sleeping if Palombo has an errand to run.

"Her mom is two doors down, so it's a perfect setup," she said. "We're really blessed to have people we know and trust."

Evelyn Batres, a registered nurse from Port Chester, loves her 23-year-old baby sitter, who has been part of her family for more than two years. Batres, who works the night shift, has the young woman come by five days a week at \$8 an hour to watch her 2-year-old daughter, Celeste, so she can get a few hours of sleep.

"She's trustworthy," Batres said. "I see her interact with Celeste, and she makes the right choices. She follows the household rules."

Celeste had a few words of praise for her sitter, too.

"I like when she takes me to the park," the dark-haired little girl said. "I play on the swings and it's nice."