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**By Kate Lohnes**

## **Child Care Challenge -- Baby-sitting takes responsibility, preparation**

You're 16 years old and earning extra cash for the summer by baby-sitting. You have three children under your command and their parents left for the night. No sweat, you think. I can handle this.

Then the phone rings. There's a knock on the door. The kids fight over a toy. The baby needs a diaper change.

Now what?

For teens without a summer job, baby-sitting might seem like an agreeable Plan B to flipping burgers or waiting tables. According to the Web site [sittercity.com](http://sittercity.com), which links potential sitters with families, the national average rate of pay for baby sitters is \$11 to \$12 dollars an hour; in comparison, Texas's minimum wage is \$5.15 per hour. The difference between the two pay scales, however, is one of responsibility, say both parents and baby sitters. Baby-sitting requires dedication, responsibility and a lot of patience.

Parents look for many qualities when searching for a baby sitter, said Genevieve Thiers, founder of [sittercity.com](http://sittercity.com). One of the biggest things parents like to see is energy and enthusiasm for the job. These qualities work hand-in-hand with responsibility, Thiers said. Showing maturity when meeting parents for the first time shows them you can handle the job.

"One of the things I tell parents is (sitters) should be asking parents more questions than parents are asking them," she said. "I tell our sitters that it's just like applying for a job with IBM or other companies. It should be just as serious. Come with check lists, be on time, wear a suit coat. That's what parents are looking for."

Not only will professionalism help you get the job, but it will also give you insight into a family, said 19-year-old Rachel Muñoz. Since she began baby-sitting eight years ago, Muñoz said one of her policies is to meet with parents and children together before she ever sits for them.

"I want to know as much as I can about the kids and their routines," the Texas State University student said. "I want to know if they're allergic, what they can and can't do. I

try to get the most of out of the interview because once you go to the first job, parents are like, ‘Here are the kids. Put them to bed at 8 p.m.’ ”

Many parents also look for preparedness in their baby sitters, said Dottie Malcom, a McAllen mother of two. Before leaving sons Jacob and Jay at home, Malcom said she looks for several qualities in the selected sitter, including first aid certification and how well known the sitter is within her neighborhood.

“They should go to baby-sitting classes,” she said. “They should also start out in their immediate neighborhood where people know each other, within a circle of friends.”

For teens who want to cover all their bases, the Red Cross offers a baby-sitting certification course throughout the year, said instructor David Landa. Through the Red Cross, teens can learn first aide and CPR for infants and up, as well as the basics of child care. During the eight-hour course, which is designed for kids 11 years-old and up, Landa also teaches teens what to do in hypothetical situations while alone with children. What do you do if someone knocks on the door? How do you answer the telephone? Giving students “what if” situations prepares them for things they might deal with, he said.

“I teach them the basic stuff, like how to prevent incidents around the household with anything the child could get his or her hands on,” Landa said. “They learn how to carry infants, how to feed them, change diapers, and how to make a bottle. It’s basic mother stuff I’m giving them, the basic procedures of taking care of an infant. We have a brief message about answering the phone. We give them a little scenario and try not to scare them, but we do let them know they don’t want strangers in the house.”

Typically, older baby sitters have experienced and dealt with some of the complications that can arise during baby-sitting. The older the baby sitter, the more confidently he or she can handle tough situations.

“More experienced baby sitters are probably going to know CPR and first aid, and they’ll probably be able to drive,” she said. “Their maturity level is higher.”

Muñoz said she agreed, as over the years she learned different ways of handling children. For one, she usually brings arts and crafts activities and actively plays with them, or takes them out outside to play. It’s all a product, she said, of her changing maturity level.

“I think baby-sitting has gotten easier over the years as I’ve grown up,” she said. “I’ve become a little more responsible and I’ve learned a lot. Now I can drive and take (the kids) places. I can take them to the park and keep them busier longer. They get bored just sitting there.”

### **Safe Baby-sitting**

When baby-sitting, follow these guidelines to avoid trouble:

- Get to know the parents of the children you will baby-sit.

- Talk about the job with your parents before you accept.
- Only accept jobs you know you can do.
- Know how you'll get to the job and home again.
- Know what hours you'll be expected to baby-sit.
- Always tell your parents where you'll be, how to contact you and when to expect you home.

**NEVER:**

- Open the door to anyone without checking who it is first.
  - Open the door to strangers.
  - Let someone inside the house who is using alcohol or drugs, even if you know them.
  - Tell a stranger on the phone that you are the baby sitter.
  - Stay anywhere you feel unsafe, smell smoke or hear a fire or smoke alarm.
  - Go outside to check on something strange, such as an unusual noise.
- Information courtesy of [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org).

**Baby-sitting Web sites**

For parents and teens figuring out the baby-sitting ropes, here are a few links with resources, check lists and more:

- [www.sittercity.com](http://www.sittercity.com): this Web site helps parents and baby sitters find each other based on profiles they create. Best of all, it's free to sign up.
- [www.ivillage.com/](http://www.ivillage.com/): click on the "Pregnancy and Parenting" link for the parenting page, then the "Toddlers and Preschoolers" link for information, tips and more.
- [www.kidshealth.org/teen/school\\_jobs/jobs/babysit.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/school_jobs/jobs/babysit.html): This Web page has helpful hints for teens that baby-sit, regardless of their experience

level.

- [www.redcross.org/services/hs/courses/babyindex.html](http://www.redcross.org/services/hs/courses/babyindex.html): The Red Cross has tips for both parents and baby sitters, including check lists on what to expect and important information. To contact the South Texas Red Cross for baby-sitting course information, visit [www.southtexasredcross.org](http://www.southtexasredcross.org), or call (956) 423-0523.

**Baby-sitting classes today!**

First United Methodist Church of McAllen, located at 4200 N. McColl Road, is hosting Red Cross baby-sitting courses from 8:30-11:30 a.m. today and Friday. Registration begins at 8 a.m. Call (956) 686-3784 for more information.