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By Amberly Thayer

Sitter Search

All parents need a night away from their children every now and then. When that happens, it's important to find a good baby sitter whom parents can trust with their most valuable assets.

Dot Kirkling never had a problem finding good baby sitters for her three children when they were younger. She taught a class full of them.

As a trainer for the Bartholomew/Brown County Chapter of the American Red Cross, Kirkling instructs groups of 11- to 15-year-olds in baby sitter's training courses.

"I used kids in my classes to baby-sit my own kids," Kirkling said. "So I taught them exactly how I'd like my kids to be baby-sat."

The students in the Red Cross class learn about choosing age appropriate toys and games, changing diapers, feeding and first aid.

Students also learn how to interview for baby-sitting jobs, according to Gwen Boggs, health and safety director with the Red Cross.

The Columbus Parks and Recreation Department offers its own four-week Super Sitters training class for students 11 and older.

Instructor Marla Page teaches sitters to care for infants and toddlers. The students also learn basic first aid.

During the course, students receive an emergency phone number memo board, a basic first aid manual, a packet of games and activity ideas and a certificate of completion.

According to Kathy McPeck, recreation program coordinator for the Parks and Recreation Department, Super Sitters graduates are likely to feel more comfortable baby-sitting than sitters who haven't taken the course.

"The benefits of taking the class are to make the kids more aware of different situations they could encounter while baby-sitting and give them some helpful hints," McPeck said.

Often parents seek graduates of the program to baby-sit their children.

“We have had parents from the community call and want names of people who have been in the class,” McPeck said.

Community members ask Kirkling for names of good baby sitters, too. She contacts her students and lets them decide whether or not to contact the parents who are looking for a sitter.

Local churches, schools, pediatricians and neighborhood groups can offer parents suggestions for finding good baby sitters. Parents also can ask their friends, neighbors and co-workers to recommend good sitters.

Another growing trend is finding a sitter on the Internet.

Sittercity Inc., the country’s largest online parent-baby sitter matching service, is home to more than 50,000 sitters and 15,000 parents nationwide.

Sitters older than 17 can join the site for free by building a profile that includes basic information about themselves, references and contact information. There’s also room for parent feedback.

Parents also establish profiles after registering for a one-time fee of \$40 plus a \$5 monthly charge. Then, they can search the sitter database using more than 40 criteria.

“With a secure database of more than 50,000 sitters, Sittercity has changed the way parents connect with sitters,” said Genevieve Thiers, founder and CEO of Sittercity. “Sittercity has made finding the perfect sitter simple, safe, fast and affordable.”

Based in Chicago, most of the company’s members are concentrated in large markets such as New York, Cleveland and Boston. However, the popularity of the site is growing in smaller cities such as Indianapolis.

“We are opening to Indiana right now,” Thiers says.

“All of a sudden we’re gaining a lot of momentum,” adds Susan Weiss, a public relations representative for Sittercity.

Columbus does not have any sitters or parents registered with Sittercity yet. However, that may soon change.

“In terms of expansion, we find that the areas that want us find us and ask us to open,” Thiers said.

“Our strategy is to move among the larger cities and generate enthusiasm among the smaller cities near them. This has worked very well for us.”

Questions about experience and how a sitter would handle pressure should be asked.

“Talk to the baby sitter and see how comfortable they are around children,” Kirkling said.

Other ways for parents to gauge a potential sitter’s experience are to allow them to meet and interact with their children while the parent observes them.

According to the Health A to Z Web site, parents should consider factors such as age, responsibilities, experience and skill level, personality and references when hiring a sitter.

Infants and toddlers require much more supervision than older children, and younger sitters may work best when they have to work for only a few hours and their responsibilities are limited.

Kirkling said parents should always give baby sitters a tour of their home, showing them first aid kits, alarms and certain places that are off-limits.

By using their resources, parents can find a baby sitter whom they trust and have some fun of their own.

Interview tips:

The following is a list of things that parents should ask sitters before using them for child care:

- What is your prior experience with children?
- How many families have you cared for in the past? What were the kids’ ages?
- Have you ever been convicted of a felony?
- What is your course of study in school?
- Do you know first aid?
- Do you know CPR?
- Are you familiar with the Heimlich maneuver?
- Can you swim?
- Are you comfortable using a phone? Are you familiar with emergency numbers?
- Do you have any allergies to cats, dogs or other pets?
- Can you keep calm in a crisis? Give examples.
- Can you drive in an emergency?
- Do you have experience in bathing children?
- Do you have a backup ride home in case we cannot drive you?
- Are you OK if a job runs later than planned?
- Describe a typical day with kids –what would you do?
- How do you feel about play dates for my kids? Can you help arrange these?
- Can you care for more kids if we have a play date in the house?
- What is your worst experience in child care, and how did you resolve it?
- What kinds of discipline do you use for kids? Spanking, etc.? Are you willing to change if we ask?

- Are you OK assisting with homework, making dinner and/or doing light housework?

- *From Sittercity*