

# Parents

*August 2007 Issue*

By Jeannette Moninger

## **Got Kids. Need Sitter.**

**How to find a babysitter you'd trust with your child, any night of the week.**

### **The Search Begins**

You've heard the advice: Go on date nights with your husband. Make time to hang out with friends. Yet every Friday night you're either glued to the baby monitor or watching *Over the Hedge* with your toddler. It just seems easier than trying to line up a sitter. Where can you find someone you trust? And how can you be sure she's experienced? We've pulled together all the info you need to find a great babysitter your family will love.

You're looking for someone who can handle a crisis and who won't spend the night text-messaging her boyfriend. The obvious first step: Hit up neighbors, friends, and coworkers for recommendations. No luck? Try your pediatrician's office, the local daycare center or preschool, high schools (talk to the guidance counselor), and colleges (check with career services and the education and nursing departments). Or go online: For a fee, sites like Sittercity and CallForSitters will connect you with babysitters in your area. You can also try a free classifieds site like Craigslist, but always ask for (and call!) lots of references.

As you line up potential sitters, avoid going too young just to save cash. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that babysitters be at least 13 years old, but choose one in her mid to late teens if you have an infant. "She should be mature enough to handle an emergency," explains Kathleen Clarke-Pearson, MD, a pediatrician in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. If she's young and hasn't had much experience sitting, ask whether she has younger siblings she's watched, or whether she's worked at a day camp. Or you may luck out and find a teen who's taken a babysitter-training course offered by the American Red Cross or the YMCA; she'll know basic first aid like how to treat cuts and bee stings and what to do if your child is choking.

[sittercity.com](http://sittercity.com)

[callforsitters.com](http://callforsitters.com)

[craigslist.org](http://craigslist.org)

## Get to Know Her

No matter how you find a candidate, you should always interview her, says Dr. Clarke-Pearson. Do it a few weeks before you actually want her to work to give yourself time to check her references and to meet with other people. Write down your questions and encourage the sitter to bring her own, suggests Samantha Wilson, author of *The Babysitter's Handbook*. Make sure you get this info:

- What's her experience? Has she ever cared for children the same age as yours?
- How many kids is she comfortable watching at one time?
- What would she do if your baby came down with a sudden fever?
- What health issues or allergies does she have that you should know about?
- How is she planning to get to and from your home? Does she drive?

Ask her for a list of three people whom you can call to check her credentials (these could be teachers or other families who've hired her). You should also take this time to give her a rundown of your rules: Is she allowed to use your computer? Talk on the phone? Take your baby for a walk?

When it's time to talk money, make sure you know your area's going rate. In big cities like New York, Boston, and Dallas, sitters get at least 10 dollars per hour, while the price in smaller towns is more like five to eight. If you have more than two kids, plan to add a dollar or two to the standard rate.

*Check out Sittercity's rate calculator.*

## Heading Out

Once you've found someone you like, it's time to make sure she clicks with your kids too. "One of the biggest mistakes parents make is introducing a new sitter minutes before they leave," says Jean Erdtmann, RN, an American Red Cross health and safety expert who teaches sitter-training courses. "The kids feel like they're being left with a stranger." If possible, ask her to come spend an hour or two with your family before her first sitting job (pay her for her time, of course). "This is a great opportunity to see how she interacts with your children, and for you to familiarize her with your home and rules, as well as answer her questions," Erdtmann says.

If you don't have time for a trial run, have the sitter arrive at least an hour before you need to leave so you can show her around the house. Go over your house rules including how much -- if any -- TV and computer time the kids are allowed to have, which snacks are off-limits, and how she should handle discipline problems. And give her the rundown on your kids' bedtime routines. "Tell her if your child sleeps with a special blanket, is allowed to take a cup of water to bed, or prefers to have the hallway light stay on at night," Wilson says. Leave her with a list that includes the following information.

- Your children's names, birthdays, and weights
- Your cell-phone number and the address where you'll be
- Your home address and phone number
- Your pediatrician's number
- The number for Poison Control (800-222-1222)
- The number of a neighbor or relative she can call in case of an emergency
- Your kids' medical info, including allergies
- Important house rules (for example, don't smoke)

Once your kids and babysitter have settled in together, don't hang around. While younger children may burst into tears when you leave, most will stop crying a few minutes after you're out of sight. Check in once to make sure everything is okay, but don't waste your evening out worrying. Enjoy those child-free hours -- you'll be heading home before you know it.