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Who's minding my kids?

Party poppers explode with more pep, champagne bubbles with more brilliance, and "Auld Lang Syne" sounds more beautiful when a parent knows his or her child is safely tucked in bed on New Year's Eve.

Sitters are booked more quickly than New Year's resolutions are forgotten, and finding a sitter at the last minute is enough to make parents doubt the possibility of a night on the town. But before becoming resigned to spending a night in pajamas, try some of these hints for finding a sitter who will be happy to ring in the new year with your kids. With a little luck and a lighter wallet, you'll be sharing a New Year's Kiss at midnight without the "EWWs" and "AAHs" of your children in the background.

Parents seeking sitter

TEP seek QFB for 3CKs and a MN night out.

That's, "Totally Exhausted Parents seek Qualified Fun Baby-sitter for three Cute Kids and a Much-Needed night out."

But there's no need to post a personal ad; finding a baby sitter takes just a click of the mouse as Web sites such as SitterCity.com provide online "matchmaking" services for parents and sitters.

Genevieve Thiers launched Sittercity.com after being "horrified" at seeing a nine-months-pregnant woman scaling a flight of 235 steps on a college campus in Boston, hanging fliers advertising her need for a baby sitter.

Thiers relieved the woman of her fliers and sent her home with an assurance that she would finish the job for her. As she was posting the remaining fliers, Thiers pondered the woman's plight. "I thought, 'That's interesting, why isn't there one place where parents can go to find a list of baby sitters?'" she says.

And so, Sittercity.com was launched in 2001 in Boston, where Thiers baby-sat for about 30 families as she earned degrees in English and music at Boston College.

"I'm the oldest of seven, so I've been sitting forever," she says.

By the time Thiers was ready to get her master's degree in opera in 2004, her Web site had grown to be national, and headquarters moved with her to Chicago. Today, there are more than 150,000 sitters older than age 17 waiting for jobs across the country. When they register at Sittercity.com, parents can post their jobs, search for sitters and access the site's Babysitting Library. Parents can register for the services through the monthly plan, paying \$39.99 to register and then \$9.99 each month, or the annual plan, which has no registration fee and costs \$7.99 per month and includes a two-year subscription to Parenting magazine.

Sitters looking for jobs can register for free, answering 42 questions on the registration form and completing a profile that parents can view.

A quick search on the site found more than 100 sitters within 10 miles of the 15212 Downtown ZIP code and 15237 McCandless area, 58 sitters within 10 miles of the 15084 Tarentum ZIP code, and 19 within 10 miles of the 15601 Greensburg area.

To wade through the sea of sitters on the site, parents can refine searches. "It's kind of like a baby-sitting lab over here," says Thiers, who sings opera professionally in Chicago when she's not too busy at Sittercity.com. "We're the Google of child care."

Resolve to go out

As holiday parties and New Year's Eve celebrations are announced, baby sitters become hot commodities. There are more than 150,000 waiting for a job at Sittercity.com, a certified Women's Business Enterprise.

As the first and largest online baby-sitter search service, Sittercity.com experiences "a bit of a swell the week before New Year's" as parents post jobs, Thiers says.

"There's the time when they do post, and the time when they should post," she says.

If there's a chance you'll need a sitter for New Year's Eve, posting a job in the first couple weeks of December is ideal.

But the site's sitters are ready for the onslaught of job offers that come with the holidays.

"I think they always get ready for it," Thiers says. "We see a lot of them updating their profiles."

Landing a New Year's Eve job is profitable for sitters; the average rates of \$10-\$12 per hour jump to -\$20-\$40 per hour.

In the chance that the site doesn't come through with a sitter for the evening, there still is plenty of fun to be had.

"Make it into a big family party," Thiers says. "Generally, if you tell the kids, 'If you're good you can stay up until midnight,' you can hold that over their heads the whole evening, and they're pretty well behaved."

The cost of sitting

Baby-sitting is a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it. The responsibility that comes with caring for children deserves to be handsomely rewarded.

The average pay rate for a baby sitter is \$10-\$12 per hour, but this "minimum wage" varies based on several considerations. Sittercity.com created a rate calculator that factors in ZIP code, number of children, age of the baby sitter and the amount of experience she has had. A sitter age 17-21 who has between two and four years of child-care experience can expect a rate of \$11.25 per hour watching three children in the Downtown ZIP code of 15212, according to the rate calculator.

These rates can increase or decrease, depending on the type of job. Other factors that affect the rate include caring for an early newborn or twins, expectations of housework, an overnight job, sitting during a special event or holiday, caring for a special-needs child or accompanying the family on vacation.

Ode to baby sitting

Hollywood has given baby sitters their due in many movies.

Among the highlights:

Mary Poppins (1964) -- A magical nanny takes two young children of a wealthy London banker into the world of imagination -- and song and dance. Not only is Mary Poppins "practically perfect in every way," she shows the family that there are more important things in life than money.

Adventures In Babysitting (1987) -- Chris Parker, played by Elisabeth Shue, the girlfriend from "Karate Kid," agrees to baby-sit for her prepubescent neighbors when her dream date stands her up. She thinks she's in for a dull evening with three kids and the television, until her friend Brenda calls. Chris piles the kids into the family's station wagon to rescue Brenda from a bus station in downtown Chicago, and the adventures in baby sitting begin.

Weekend With the Babysitter (1970) -- When a middle-aged husband falls for his children's teenaged baby sitter, she leads him through a weekend of way-out youth culture.

Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead (1991) -- When their geriatric baby sitter dies of a heart attack, the Crandell kids think they're in for a great summer. No supervision also means no money, however, and the oldest of the five kids enters the workforce to support the family until their mother comes home from vacation.

Mrs. Doubtfire (1993) -- When an out of work voice-over actor is denied custody of his kids after his divorce, he's determined to remain a part of their lives. Taking on the shape of an old woman lets him land a job as their nanny and get his life straightened out.

The Baby-Sitter's Club (1995) -- The seven girls of Ann M. Martin's Baby-sitter's Club series are turning 13 just in time for summer vacation. New boyfriends, old rivals and family woes test the girls' friendships and their abilities to overcome challenges.

Baby-sitting bonus

How many times in the past year has your baby sitter camped out with your kids so you could take care of business, run errands or have a night out? Slipping a holiday bonus into your sitter's pay lets her know she's appreciated, and will keep her coming back next year.

"Usually, a bonus is just whatever they would make during a job doubled," Thiers says.

For permanent nannies, include an extra week's pay in their paycheck.

Sitter certification

The peace of mind that comes with knowing one's child is in good hands makes any parent ready to party. No new job comes without some training, and the Safe Sitter classes being taught around Pittsburgh offer just that for 11- to 13-year-olds who want to start baby sitting.

"That's exactly the age we found kids to be starting their sitting experience," says Sherry Kaminski, a registered nurse who teaches the course with assistant Melissa Peterson at Destination Wellness in The Galleria at Pittsburgh Mills, Frazer Township.

About 65 Safe Sitter students -- a handful of them boys -- have been certified through the two-day course since Destination Wellness began teaching it in June.

Certification comes after the students pass a written test, demonstrate proper rescue breathing methods for infants and children, and administer the Heimlich maneuver to children and back blows and chest thrusts to infants.

"We teach them how to have success on the job," Kaminski says.

In addition to teaching children what to do in case of an emergency, preventing problem behavior and injuries, and tips about entertaining their charges, Safe Sitter course also give students an idea of whether babysitting is something they're willing to do.

"Not all 11-year-olds want to be changing diapers," Kaminski says.

The \$40 class not only teaches students how to take care of their charges, it also stresses the importance of taking care of themselves during the job. A baby sitter never should leave his or her name and phone number on bulletin boards to solicit jobs, because it gives anyone the opportunity to contact them. Any calls that a sitter receives for a job offer should come with references as to who recommended the sitter to the family. After the baby sitter confirms that the references are legitimate, he or she should visit the home to meet the parents and children and tour the house and make a help sheet listing emergency numbers and information.

"If you do have a child that is going to be taking care of little ones, I do think it's important that we tie up little things like that," Kaminski says.

Most grandparents will do just about anything for their grandkids: bake, shop, play dress up. Some are even registering for a new hour-and-a-half Babysitting for Grandparents course at Destination Wellness.

"We update them on some of the things that have changed over the years," says Kaminski, who is scheduled to teach the class when it starts Jan. 20.

These veteran child-care providers don't need any certifications, but the class, which costs \$5, reviews what to do if an infant or child is choking, how to position a baby while sleeping in a crib and how to prevent problem behavior and injuries.

Grandparents buy a lot of toys for their grandkids, and Kaminski reviews which ones still are safe and which ones aren't, such as rolling walkers. The class, previously taught at the Alle-Kiski Medical Center in Harrison Township, also reviews new laws pertaining to child care.

"Not all grandparents are from the era where they had to use a child seat," she says.

Safe Sitter classes

Where: Destination Wellness at the Galleria at Pittsburgh Mills, Frazer Township

When: According to interest; monthly after January, twice per month in the summer

Cost: \$40

Details: 724-274-5202

Babysitting for Grandparents Classes

Where: Destination Wellness at the Galleria at Pittsburgh Mills

When: noon -2 p.m. Jan. 20

Cost: \$5

Details: 724-274-5202

"Mom, the baby sitter's cheating"

You've provided your baby sitter with snacks, a stack of "Dora the Explorer" DVDs and permission to send your kids to bed if they get too unruly -- what else could she need? A Babysitter Cheat Sheet -- a list of important phone numbers, house safety features, medical information and behavioral "quirks" about each of your children helps to make the night run smoothly.

Sittercity.com, created a customizable, printable cheat sheet to give your sitter something to refer to when your 10-year-old daughter insists, "But Mom always lets me stay up and watch 'South Park,' " or when your 3-year-old son won't stop crying because his special blanket is in the wash.

After listing contact information, emergency numbers, and where fire extinguishers, flashlights and First-Aid kits are located, the sheet acts as a guidebook to your child. There's a place to talk about tantrum inducers, play-date contacts and medications. You also can mention each child's eating characteristics, bedtime routine, what kind of entertainment you approve of and how to curb their phone/video game/text message/candy/"Harry Potter" addictions.

There's even a spot to remind your sitter of the rules you've set out for her --what to do if the phone or doorbell rings, how much time she can spend talking on the phone, whether she's permitted to have visitors, expectations of housekeeping or tutoring, and whether she should "use the car only in emergency" or "pull a Ferris Bueller."

[Click here for printable Babysitter Cheat Sheets.](#)

Help wanted

There are more than 150,000 baby sitters waiting at sittercity.com, and parents in some of the biggest cities in the United States receive 100 responses to their job posting. Weeding through that many applicants for one baby-sitting job sounds like a lot of work, but with a four-step process crafted by Sittercity.com, you'll soon have your very own Mary Poppins.

Sitters can be anxious to respond to jobs, even if they don't exactly fit the criteria a parent requests. "The first thing to do is go through and find the ones that don't fit 100 percent of your criteria, then narrow your list down," says Genevieve Thiers, who started Sittercity.com in 2001. Many parents also scan profiles for typographic errors: "Spelling and punctuation are important to a lot of parents," Thiers says.

So is a face to put with a name -- sitters are 10 times more likely to be chosen if they include a photograph in their profile.

Contacting the references of those sitters on your newly narrowed list of names is step 1 in the screening process. Sitters registered with Sittercity.com are required to include at least one reference and their e-mail address and phone number. In the case of younger sitters who are just starting their child-care careers, mothers or teachers might be used as a reference. The conversation with the reference should gauge the sitter's job performance, the amount of supervision she needed, her capabilities and whether your kids are likely to hide in their rooms when they hear her knocking on the door.

After a sitter's references check out, Sittercity.com members have another resource to screen potential sitters. Step 2, the internal feedback system on the site, allows parents and sitters to leave comments about each other that can be viewed by anyone, similar to user feedback on eBay. There are star icons next to profiles of Super Sitters, earned by those who get positive reviews, have a complete profile, have certification courses and respond to jobs promptly.

Step 3 is the interview. More than an opportunity to get to know the sitter, this is when you can form a gut instinct as to whether he or she will be a good fit for your children and home. Beyond her child-care credentials and experience, learn how the potential sitter disciplines children, hear about past dealings with baby-sitting emergencies, ask how flexible his or her schedule can be, and find out what he or she would plan for a day with your kids.

At this point, you should be down to one great candidate. Step 4, the last step to take before signing on with a sitter, is running a background check. For \$9.99, Sittercity.com will run a LexisNexis background check on any sitters profile in 10 minutes after the person being screened authorizes the check. Some sitters even purchase checks on themselves and post it on their profile to let parents know whether they are "practically perfect in every way."

Questions to pose

You've found someone who wants to take care of your children. After finding out why he or she likes this kind of torture, these questions can help you get a feel for your potential baby sitter during a preliminary interview.

What is your prior experience with children? How many years, etc.?

What child-care roles have you done in the past? Sitter, nanny, etc.
What is your rate for each role?
Do you live nearby? How can you get to jobs with us?
Have you ever been convicted of a felony?
Do you know First Aid, CPR and the Heimlich maneuver?
Can you keep calm in an emergency? Give examples.
Can you drive in an emergency?
How many years have you been driving, and do you have any marks against your record?
Do you have experience bathing children?
Are you OK if a job runs later than planned?
Describe a typical day with the 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, possibly making dinner and/or doing light housework?
Are you comfortable watching my child as a mother's helper if I decide to stay home during work?
What do you look for in an employer?
How soon will you let us know whether you can't do a job?

Sitter soiree

Torn between a classy night out and ringing in the new year with your kids? Adding a baby sitter or two to the guest list lets parents sip champagne with adults and bang on pots and pans with the kids.

Hosting a party with a baby sitter involved lightens a parent's responsibilities, but a few things need to be cleared up before the guests -- both kids and adults -- arrive.

When a sitter is hired, let him or her know what he or she is in for -- including how many kids will be attending and how old they'll be. When sending invites, make sure guests RSVP for themselves and their children.

"It really isn't fair to hire a sitter and have 40 kids for them," says Genevieve Thiers, an entrepreneur who launched online child-care service Sittercity.com.

Communicating exactly what you expect of your sitter ensures that there are no surprises during the job. Are kids to be out of sight, or will they mingle throughout the house?

"Let them know if they will be helping to clean up at the end, too," Thiers says.

Finally, just as you must entertain your guests, their children will need to be amused, as well. Simply piling all of the kids in one room won't do the trick. "Give them games, food, a TV, some videos and other activities," Thiers says.

She knows first hand the stress that ensues when these provisions are forgotten. When she and her twin sister were hired to help out at a holiday party in Philadelphia, they arrived at the job to find 40 kids waiting for them.

Known as the musical twins of the town, Thiers is a professionally trained opera singer, and her sister plays the organ. Their talents turned out to be somewhat of a curse that night, however.

"The couple not only had us baby-sit for them, they asked us to entertain their guests with some carols," Thiers says. "I don't know how we got through that night."