

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

March 15, 2005

Lorraine Kee

The perfect baby-sitter may be just a click away

Stuck for a baby sitter on a Saturday night?

One of the hottest trends in child care is online baby-sitting. These services might cost you a little more (depending on the market, \$8 to \$12 an hour or more if it's New Year's Eve) than the neighbor kid. But odds are these sitters won't all be booked on the same nights you need them.

Chicago-based sittercity.com has a database of 50,000 baby sitters nationwide. About 20,000 parents who paid \$39.99 to join and a \$5 monthly fee can access the service.

Think of the site as a "match.com" for parents, Sittercity.com's Genevieve Thiers explains. "We can help," Thiers adds. "It's a click away."

Other similar sites include phoneababysitter.com, mynannycalledinsick.com and 4sitters.com. "A lot of the growth has to do with people becoming more comfortable with the concept of the Internet and using it as a tool," says Sheila Kerr, who founded the Toronto-based mynannycalledinsick.com with her husband, Gil Hauer.

ELECTRONIC BABY-SITTER

So how do these services work?

Parents and sitters join the latter usually for free and are placed in databases. Mynannycalledinsick charges about \$38 for parents to join. Sitters 14 to 17 year olds can join, if they have parental consent and \$5 for the annual membership fee. Sittercity.com requires sitters to be at least 17 years old.

Parents can choose sitters based on search criteria contained in sitter profiles. The criteria include where the sitter lives (parents usually want a sitter within a few miles of their home), their fees and availability. Some sitters also list whether they smoke, are bilingual or are first-aid certified.

The services then alert sitters about potential jobs in their area.

After a connection is made, the sites suggest parents be proactive by contacting sitters and interviewing them. But some also require that sitters provide references or a criminal records check. And some provide online space for parents to provide feedback.

BABY STEPS

Both Thiers and Kerr say their services got off to a slow start, as parents gradually warmed to the idea of seeking sitters online. But lately things have been booming, they say.

Thiers launched her site in 2001 when she was a student at Boston University. One of seven children, she baby-sat to put herself through college. Along the way, Thiers amassed 30 families as clients and her phone was still ringing. Finding a good baby sitter isn't easy, she notes. She told a story of watching a pregnant woman post signs on campus seeking a sitter.

But sittercity.com wasn't born until she met her boyfriend through an online dating service. "Wouldn't it be great to use this as a model?" she thought.

Mynannycalledinsick.com's Kerr is the mother of three boys, ages 2, 5 and 6. She came up with the idea when her own sitter, after a night of partying, called at 6 a.m. to tell Kerr she couldn't make an appointment an hour later.

There's got to be a better way, she thought. "I come at it from a parent's perspective," Kerr says. She and her husband launched their site in August 2004. It has a database of about 6,000 sitters. She declined to say how many parents had joined.

THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY

A few months ago, Leigh Hanna, of St. Louis, considered using an online service to find a sitter for her daughter, who is almost 2 years old. Hanna, 31, even started filling out an online form at one site.

She is comfortable using the Internet. She pays her bills and occasionally purchases services that way. And Hanna, then a new mother, didn't exactly know how to go about finding a sitter on her own.

"I was looking for someone who had a sense of responsibility," she says, "and obviously they have to like kids."

Then, as she neared the end of the online form, Hanna changed her mind. She had grown uneasy about paying for a list of sitters.

"I started talking to people in the neighborhood," she says.

She also called a nearby church and got the names of potential sitters. She asked candidates whether they smoked and whether they had a driver's license so she didn't have to drive them home after a job. One of the biggest factors that influenced her choice of sitter was the recommendation of her neighbors.

Through her search, Hanna found a couple of sitters on whom she can depend. "There's nothing like the old-fashioned way," Hanna says.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Online baby-sitting services might not be for everyone, but they appear to be coming soon to a neighborhood near you.

At mynannycalledinsick.com, a check of a ZIP code near the University of Missouri at St. Louis, for example, showed two sitters within five miles, 14 sitters within 10 miles and 23 sitters within 25 miles.

Sittercity.com, now in 20 cities, attempts to maintain quality control by opening market-by-market. But, as Thiers and Kerr point out, the Internet and word of mouth knows no geographical boundaries.

"A site can only be contained so long," Thiers said. "People are joining in areas we're not in officially."

Such as St. Louis.

Thiers said there are 97 sitters and three parents in the St. Louis area already listed with sittercity.com.

"When a market tops 100 sitters, there's obvious interest and we start recruiting," she added.