

December 26, 2005

By Mackenzie Carpenter

## As New Year's ball drops, baby-sitting rates go up

Thinking of ditching the kiddies with a baby sitter New Year's Eve so you can go out and celebrate with a big steak dinner and lots of champagne? Be prepared to pay extra for that privilege.

A recent survey by Sittercity.com, an online baby-sitting service, found that 68 percent of sitters will be charging \$6 to \$10 more per hour for New Year's Eve -- that is, if those sitters aren't out partying themselves.

If you haven't already booked your child care, it may be too late, said Genevieve Thiers, founder and CEO of Sittercity.com. "You may just want to start planning for Valentine's Day instead, since, next to New Year's Eve, it's the biggest date night of the year."

In Pittsburgh, where baby-sitting rates by older teenagers -- age 14 and up -- can run as much as \$10 an hour, that means New Year's Eve revelers may end up paying twice as much for the privilege of going out that night.

"It's basic economics at work," Ms. Thiers says. "There are a lot of parents out there trying to book baby sitters for holiday parties, running errands and other activities, and in some cases, the parents just don't have a solid list of reliable baby sitters."

There is no scientific data available about how much it costs to hire a baby sitter these days, but it's a far cry from the pennies per hour of yesteryear. In larger cities like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, young adults age 17 and up charge, on average, about \$15 an hour, said Ms. Thiers.

In contrast, Pittsburgh sitters tend to charge \$6 to \$8, based on Ms. Thiers' survey of her online database in the Pittsburgh area, which contains about 800 names of people available to watch children.

Kathy Hunt, who manages a baby-sitting education program at Magee-Womens Hospital, believes high school and college students charge more than that -- from \$8 to \$10 an hour for an older teen caring for two children. Many charge extra if the job lasts past midnight, she added.

Indeed, it's a baby sitter's market these days -- if she (or he) is a good one.

"If word gets out that they're responsible, that person is going to get a lot of jobs," said Ms. Hunt.

Magee's program is essentially a training class for children as young as 10 years old, designed to teach them the basics of a job as a mother's helper or to care for siblings -- from diapering and dressing, to coping with safety hazards.

Ms. Thiers divides baby sitters into three groups. "There's the 12 to 14 set, who are pretty young but capable," who often just will accept what payment they're given, she said. "Then there's the high school set, from age 14 to 18, who usually can't drive and they don't have as many certifications, for CPR, for instance, and they often have to go home early." They're the ones mostly charging between \$6 to \$8, she added.

The older group, age 17 and older, are the ones she signs onto her Web service. "They're a higher class of baby sitter. They're more mature and responsible, so you're getting more for your money."

Still, those older, more established sitters will sometimes give favored clients a break -- at least those who are still living at home and don't have to worry about paying the rent. Sarah Manko, 18, of Emsworth, says her going rate is usually about \$4 an hour, "although I charge one family \$2 an hour because I really like the kids and I've been with them for a long time."

Andrea Zin, 19, of Squirrel Hill, is a sophomore at Carnegie Mellon University who baby-sits frequently. She believes sitter fees in Pittsburgh's East End tend to be around \$6 to \$7 an hour, although her sister Alexa, 16, considers that figure fairly low. She charges \$10 an hour when baby-sitting one family with four children, although she'll go down to \$8, "depending on how many kids." She also thinks she could charge more if she could drive.

"I love to baby-sit, and it's a really good way to make money," she said, "especially if the kids are well-behaved instead of running around all the time."

Certainly, the number of children in a family makes a big difference in baby-sitting prices. In Ben Avon, notes Kim Ifft, there are many stay-at-home mothers who will watch children of working mothers -- mostly teachers in the nearby public schools -- for what is informally known in her community as the "teacher rate" of about \$30 a day per child.

"If it's one kid, that comes out to about \$2.70 an hour for that child, which doesn't make much economic sense. But if you are watching two or three or four kids, that adds up to good money," said Ms. Ifft, a mother of four who relies on a tried-and-true group of baby sitters whose rates range from \$6 to \$8.

"It's a great deal for kids. Where else are you going to make \$6 an hour? You couldn't get paid like that for a job at the Dairy Queen."

With less than a week left until New Year's, however, some parents may be in for a rude shock if they haven't already lined up their child care.

Indeed, Ms. Manko won't be available to baby-sit this year, because she wants to celebrate New Year's Eve like everyone else.

Two years ago, however, she did accompany a family to a Downtown hotel, where they stayed overnight and she watched the children in a hotel room while the parents went out to a party. They all later spent the night in the hotel, and she was given her own room.

For that, she was paid \$150, without even asking.

"They told me they knew how hard it is to get a baby sitter and they appreciated that I was able to be there for them," she said.