



February 6, 2005
By Brian Kladko

Baby sitters unlimited

You think finding a good man is hard? Try finding a good baby sitter.

Oh, sure, parents do it all the time. But it's tedious – begging friends and neighbors for referrals, posting fliers, paying for classified newspaper ads, playing telephone tag. Or it requires paying a few hundred dollars to an agency.

It's a task, in other words that cried out for the Internet.

Several online sites, borrowing a page form online dating services, have begun offering parents and baby sitters a new forum for finding each other.

At fist, parents might shudder at the notion of entrusting their children to someone met thought the anonymity of cyberspace, where anyone could be lurking. But if it works for first dates, why not baby-sitting?

None of the services screen baby sitters for parents, though they often allow parents to rate baby sitters, in much the same way that eBay sellers are rated by previous purchasers. The services also encourage face-to-face interviews before hiring, and the usual checking of references.

“Everybody is a stranger until you meet them,” said Sheila Kerr, the Canadian founder of mynannycalledinsick.com. “Even a friend of a friend is a stranger.”

The services all generally work the same way:

Parents pay a fee to get access to the site, and babysitters register for free. Some sites require parents to post specific jobs they need to fill, then wait for replies. Other sites allow parents to see a list of sitters in the area and contact the ones they're interested in. In most cases, all communication is done through the site to protect each party's privacy.

The services can be especially helpful for parents who have just moved to a new community. And, as the Internet ahs done in other realms, it sometimes creates new connections among people who cross paths everyday. Using Student-Sitters.com, Susan Burrell, a Somerset County mother, discovered a sitter who lived a few blocks away.

“A family will say, ‘I was unaware there was a sitter in the neighborhood, within a couple blocks of us,’” said Wayne Schlicht, a Minnesotan who started 4Sitters.com with his wife. “It’s so surprising how we put neighbors together.”

Like matchmaking sites, the success of online baby-sitting services depends on attracting a critical mass of parents and sitters in each local area. Not enough sitters and the parents look elsewhere; not enough parents and the sitters don’t sign up.

Mynannycalledinsick.com and 4Sitters.com cast a wide net right away, welcoming parents and sitters from anywhere in North America. But a sitter in San Diego is of no use to someone in Saddle River.

Two other online sites are more deliberate in their approach.

Student-Sitters.com, a one-woman operation started by Deborah Brooks, entered Northern Jersey last month, after taking out ads in the student newspaper at Montclair State University and mailing postcards to thousands of families in Bergen, Passaic and Essex counties. For the past year, it has been operating in New Brunswick, home of Rutgers University, where it has accumulated a roster of 200 sitters and 50 parents, Brooks said.

Brooks, whose site also operates in Washington, Los Angeles, San Diego and San Jose, Calif., carefully chooses her markets based on two main criteria: Each must have a university with a large pool of commuting students (so they have cars), and a large pool of families “with decent incomes.”

“It’s really just an introduction device,” she said. “It’s really in some ways not different from posting a flier at a university on your own. It’s just that I do that for you.”

The sight of a pregnant woman trudging around campus posting fliers was the inspiration for Genevieve Thiers, founder of Sittercity.com.

“I think she was about eight months along, and I remember thinking, ‘It has to be really bad if she’s out here in the snow, posting signs for sitters,’” said Thiers, who was a student at Boston College –and a sought-after sitter- at the time. “I basically sat down and thought, ‘How can you put all the baby sitters in one place?’”

Five years later, Sittercity.com is the largest of the baby-sitting matching sites, having signed up more than 50,000 sitters and 25,000 families. Parents pay \$40 to use the service for the first month and \$5 a month thereafter.

The company focuses on major cities, entering the New York market in 2002. After noticing that New Jerseyans were using the site, too, it opened a separate section for the state this winter. Already, the company claims to have 2,000 registered sitters in New Jersey, most of them in the northern part of the state.

What works in a concentrated city, however, doesn't always translate to suburban sprawl, especially because sitters often don't have their own cars. Carrie Kaufman found several sitters through sittercity.com when she was living in New York, but after moving to Montclair in the fall, hasn't had much luck.

"I've been a little bit disappointed about that," she said. "It's just maybe because New Jersey is spread out... or the demographics are just a little bit different."

Then again, Elizabeth Bibb- who lives even farther from the big city- has found Sittercity.com fairly reliable.

"I can't say it's 100 percent solved my problem, but I find that if I do check in on a regular basis and post a need, I get a very quick response," said Bibb, who lives in Chester Township. "And all the kids who've responded, as far as I know, have been very responsible. They've all been willing to give references, and have all shown up when they said they will."

Bibb used to sue agencies, but became convinced they were not doing the kind of vetting they claimed. And she found that classified ads in newspapers attracted people looking only for full-time work. The online sites, she said, seemed suited to her needs: Someone who needs a sitter occasionally, often on short-notice.

"The sad thing is, it's always kind of a gamble," Bibb said. "My preference is to use somebody through word of mouth- someone who has been recommended by another mother. That's definitely where I feel the most comfortable."