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**By Maria Elena Baca**

## **Easing the Juggling Act**

It's the holiday season and you have the party invitation, the dress, the shoes... and the kids. Unless Santa Claus will be the guest of honor, many parents would prefer that their children be nestled snugly in their beds under the care of a good baby sitter instead. But sitters' time during the holidays is at a premium.

Sittercity.com ([www.sittercity.com](http://www.sittercity.com)), an online sitter service inspired by dating services, could be the answer to your holiday wishes.

Sittercity's CEO, Genevieve Thiers, baby-sat her way through Boston College in the late '90s.

"I'd come back and my answering machine would be blinking with five other mothers," she said. "I started passing the jobs off to friends, but it rapidly got out of control, and I thought, 'Why isn't there one place in the city where parents can go when they want to find baby sitters?'"

Shortly after she graduated in 2000, Thiers blanketed Boston with 10,000 fliers. Within three weeks, she had a database of 600 sitters, whom she paired with the 30 families on her personal list.

"It just kind of exploded from there," she said. The site was officially launched in Boston in September 2001. The service now is available in 15 cities, including Minneapolis/St. Paul.

Here's how it works:

Sitters, most of whom are local college students, can register for free. They include profile information, such as their school and major, their age, previous experience, certifications, references and a short biography. Parents pay \$39.99 to register and \$5 a month to browse the sitters' profiles and post specific jobs. Job postings are e-mailed to sitters' accounts, and they can respond, by e-mail or telephone. Parents and prospective sitters meet, check each other out, negotiate pay (usually \$10 to \$12 an hour) and can set up a job. The site also includes eBay-inspired rating and evaluation tools, as well as guidelines for parents and sitters to make the best match possible.

If the process sounds familiar, it should. Thiers was browsing Match.com when she had her epiphany.

"As online dating gets more popular, our site gets more popular, as well," she said. "The more popular those services get, the more willing parents get to try our idea of moving the child-care industry online."

Thiers has been successful on both fronts. She met her boyfriend, Dan, online just as she was launching Sittercity.

"And we're madly in love," she said, laughing.

Sittercity does not screen prospective sitters, but the company does have partnerships with organizations that will do criminal background checks for a fee. However, in the three years she's run the company, Thiers said, only a few parents have requested a background check.

"Parents are changing," she said. "A lot of moms are working. They do interviews all the time at work, and they're starting to say, 'Why can't I do this? Why can't I ask the same questions an agency would ask?'"

Bonds develop quickly.

Hillary Frazey of Crystal has used Sittercity since shortly after the site was launched in the Twin Cities this past spring. Frazey's family lives in Indiana. Her husband's parents have been happy to take care of their two preschool-aged daughters. But they live in Ham Lake, quite a haul for a Saturday night, and they haven't made any fruitful neighborhood baby-sitting connections. The result was that they just weren't going out.

"As soon as I read about it, I went online and signed up," she said.

The Frazey's have used several sitters they've found on the site, and have been especially pleased with three.

"A couple haven't really worked out, but I have so many to choose from and we have made such great relationships," Frazey said.

Frazey interviews prospective sitters, and said she's further comforted by the idea that sitters have to seek out the site, and take the time to respond to her job posting, as opposed to just grabbing her phone number off a bulletin board, another popular sitter-seeking option. She also screens candidates by the vibe she gets from their Sittercity profiles.

"I filter by a lot of things, and I do check references, but I go by my gut, and if there's anything in the communication that doesn't strike me quite right, I say we've found

someone else," she said. "I trust the Internet. I go with my gut, and I'm very comfortable with getting hooked up to people online, and it wasn't happening any other way."

Like Thiers, Frazey met her husband online in 1996. She has recommended the baby-sitting service to friends. "It's the best \$40 I ever spent," she said.

Mindy Malone of Maple Grove was one of the Frazey's first Sittercity sitters, and remains their favorite. Malone, a child psychology major at the University of Minnesota, responded to a flier she saw on campus.

"I just went to the Web site and went, 'Well, what the heck. I'll go ahead and try it out,'" she said.

She's baby-sat for three families, including repeat visits to the Frazey's, and says she's had only positive experiences.

"It's been great," she said. "The families I've found on the Web have been wonderful, and Hillary's family is awesome."

Malone would recommend Sittercity to other students. For her, it's not only a job, but a way to practice her child-interaction skills as she heads toward graduation in December.

"Do it if you're interested in working with children," she said. "I do it for the extra money, and it's good extra money. I would highly recommend it."

## MORE INFORMATION

- **What is it?** A college baby sitter-family match service modeled on Internet dating sites. Founded in 2001 and launched in the Twin Cities in March 2004.
- **Where can I find it?** <http://www.sittercity.com>.
- **How much does it cost?** Registration is free to sitters. Parents pay a \$39.99 introductory fee and \$5 a month to browse sitters' profiles and post specific jobs. Families and sitters negotiate their own rates.
- **Random fact:** More than 40,000 families and sitters are registered in 15 U.S. metro areas. About 850 sitters and more than 300 families are registered on the Twin Cities site.

Source: Sittercity.com.