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By Sharon Kennedy Wynne

Holiday hunt for babysitter begins

Forget the hot toy or video game. The most sought-after prize at holiday time is a babysitter. Not only are they in hot demand by other parents, but they have activities of their own.

"I have one mother who has a teenager who can babysit, but she doesn't want to do it anymore because she has her life and after-school activities," said Janice Andrews of Palm Harbor, who started the drop-in babysitting service Kidz Kare earlier this year after she realized her own sitter hunts could be a niche market. Holidays are proving to be a boon to her business.

Aside from the local play centers and day cares that offer date nights and drop-off babysitting services, how can busy parents secure that elusive prize who will mind the kids while they shop or attend the company Christmas party? Here are some tips.

Ask early and often. Sitters are already booked for December weekends and New Year's Eve before the Thanksgiving turkey is even thawed. If your babysitter is spoken for, ask her to recommend some friends. Day care workers often are willing to babysit to make extra money or know other day care workers who do. Tell friends and neighbors you are looking. If you belong to a church, ask the volunteers in the church nursery if they have any leads.

Trade off. Need shopping time or have an office party that's different than your friend's? Offer to watch each other's kids

Combine forces. If a friend has secured the elusive sitter, up the ante by offering to pay her to watch yours at their house, too. Depending on the ages of the kids, four kids can be as easy to watch as two because they'll play together and settle down for a movie and popcorn. The sitter makes more money and everybody goes home happy.

Use the 'Net. SitterCity.com, BabySitters.com and even Craigslist work like dating sites to match parents and babysitters. They post profiles and even reviews for parents. The screening is left up to the parents, however.

Play centers. Many day cares, play centers, kids museums and even YMCAs offer date nights and New Year's Eve specials. Some, such as My Little Play Town www.mylittleplaytown.com at 1260 West Bay Drive in Largo, have forms online that

need to be downloaded and notarized. So it's a little more paperwork, but you can get three hours of shopping or date time for \$20. Kidz Kare (www.kidzkarebabysitting.com), the Palm Harbor dropoff babysitting service Andrews runs at 3720 Tampa Road, offers six hours for \$39.