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Can't find a sitter? Web service can help

You and your spouse would love to check out a brand-new restaurant you've heard about. Or maybe an upcoming concert that looks like a blast.

But you've got kids, and finding a sitter on short notice is not as easy as watching "The Nanny" on TV.

Here's an idea: Sittercity.com, run by entrepreneur Genevieve Thiers, is a national database of 150,000 sitters looking for jobs. Maybe you can find one tonight after all.

"The site is formulated with day-of calls in mind," says Thiers, 28.

Using Sittercity.com costs \$39.99 for registration and \$9.99 a month after that. The yearly rate is about \$95.88 (\$7.99 a month), and there's no registration fee.

Online since 2001, Sittercity is where babysitters go to find jobs and where parents go to find sitters. Some corporations rely on Sittercity to help their employees.

That's good to know, but how does it work -- and is it a safe way to hire child-care workers?

If you're a parent, you search for a babysitter in and near your ZIP code. You can search within a radius you specify and decide whether the sitter should have her or his own transportation.

Next, you choose the three-hour block of time you'll need the sitter, say from 6 to 9 p.m. Friday, or choose consecutive blocks of time to set aside a whole day, for instance, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays through Fridays.

You can search by various qualifications, including sitters who know CPR, don't smoke, do miscellaneous housework or know sign language. The search can include not just sitters but companies and agencies, if you want.

Anyone can search the site for free, but contact information and more detailed information about sitters and sitter-searchers is not available until you register and pay the membership fees.

Ultimately, you decide if you are comfortable with the idea of hiring a stranger to watch your children -- and you can interview potential sitters before hiring them. Some of my colleagues said they would be reluctant to reach beyond their own network of friends and family for a short-notice babysitter. But another, a mother of two from northwest Indiana, was thrilled with Sittercity and has been using it for two months. Still others preferred Craigslist because it is free.

"We check (sitters') references, solicit feedback from parents, interview each sitter and do a background check," Thiers says of Sittercity. "With child care, you don't want it to be a crapshoot."

Those extra security steps involve extra fees, however.

Checking the background of a prospective sitter costs \$9.99. Parents also can authorize Sittercity to run background checks on themselves and show the results to sitters during the interview process. The background check costs \$9.99 and relies on the information company LexisNexis, which compiles data from public records, including court documents and police blotters.

Online reviews from parents provide an extra level of insight on a sitter's qualifications. Caregivers are deemed "Super Sitters" if they have received good reviews from parents, have taken certification training and are actively posting and responding to jobs.

Career mom Jennifer Stamper learned about Sittercity from a friend after she moved to the northern Chicago suburbs from the city.

With an active 3-year-old, Emery, and 13-month-old twins Allie and Marin, Stamper needed extra help.

"We have a nanny and a babysitter from Sittercity, and Emery loves them both," Stamper says.

But the nanny and sitter aren't just for the kids. They allow Stamper and her husband to enjoy an occasional night on the town.

"We try to have date nights every couple of weeks. It gets expensive because we have a sitter all week, but you need to nurture your marriage as much as your children."