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By Emilie Le Beau

Who's gonna watch me?

As a baby-sitter, Marisol Lopez is hired solely to watch a family's children. But dodging creepy dads also can be hidden in the job description. Once, a father asked her if she could do a cartwheel for him and his buddy. Another dad made a phallic joke with his wife present.

"I don't really [act] like I'm offended," said Lopez, 34, of Joliet. "I'm afraid they'll blame me because of the way I look and I'm really friendly."

Being cute can be a job hazard for sitters looking for work. Moms do "99 percent" of baby-sitting hiring, said Genevieve Thiers, founder of Sittercity, a baby-sitter database. And some moms purposely pass over cute sitters, especially after this summer's celebrity scandal when actor Jude Law cheated on his starlet fiancé, Sienna Miller, with his children's nanny.

Not all moms worry that their husbands will take off with the help, but Lopez says sitters do meet the occasional insecure employer. "I was interviewed by a pregnant woman who was totally into me," she said. "her husband walked in and I could see she wasn't happy with how he reacted to me, that I was a Latina girl and could cook a spicy dinner: I never got the call."

An insecure ex can also keep cute sitters out of a job. Lopez was hired by a man going through a divorce. Worried that his ex might cause problems during the divorce proceedings, the man called Lopez and said "it wouldn't look right" to have her as a sitter.

"He wanted a grandma instead," she said.

A sitter-seeking mom might worry more about what the neighbors think of her sitter's looks than her husband's reaction. Naperville mother of two Kate Kauffman does not want a sitter with visible tattoos, body piercings, or crazy-colored hair.

"I feel strongly that anyone who is with your children, taking them out to events and representing your family, needs to represent the values of your family," said Kauffman. "In my mind, the full tattoo epidemic is not a good thing, and I'd like my kids to think it's not a good thing."

With her kids now ages 14 and 12, Kauffman uses helpers during the school year and full-time during the summers. When her children were younger, she hired foreign au pairs and had to interview the young women over the phone.

“I would screen and ask them, ‘It’s a personal question, but do you have any tattoos?’ If yes, ‘Is it visible?’” she said.

One au pair came to Naperville sans tattoo but got inked during her stay.

“We told her that if the kids see it, you have to leave,” she said. “The idea of representing your family is very important.”

Baby-sitter Lani Maldonado, 20, of Evanston has a tongue piercing but said most people don’t notice. It’s her clothing that gets comments. Once while baby-sitting, she wore a statement T-shirt that read, “Don’t Bug Me.” The mother confronted her about the shirt and told her it was “inappropriate” and suggestive.”

“I never sat for her again,” Maldonado said. “I didn’t feel comfortable being around the family after the way I was treated.”

Now Maldonado has her own dress code for sitting.

“My rule is, if I can bed over and they can see my chest, it’s not OK,” she said. “That’s more for the bar scene.”

Most moms would agree, Thiers said. Moms with sons might be more forgiving of sitters who interview in “youthful attire.” But parents with daughters may consider a female baby-sitter a role model. In that case, looks can count against a sitter.

“While she may be a fashion maven and wear the latest BCBG mini, the mother will look at her and think, ‘Do I want my daughter dressing like this?’” Thiers said.

Women baby-sitting for wages are a relatively new concept in American culture and began after World War II, when women who were kicked out of factory jobs still wanted to make an income.

“In some ways, there was a hussy aspect about that,” Thiers said. “Women had a hard time letting other women into the house; it was her sanctuary.”

And Hollywood’s portrayal of sitters didn’t make it easier. People “totally overreacted” to movies like 1952’s “Don’t Bother to Knock,” starring Marilyn Monroe as an unstable sitter: “Every mom is looking at her and thinking, ‘Not in my house!’” Thiers said.

Passing over cute sitters isn’t just a matter of appearance. Experience and availability are factors too. Roscoe Village new mom Kate Greene previewed potential sitters’ pictures

on sittercity.com and passed over a few cuties because she questioned their weekend availability.

“I think baby-sitters who are cute and young, college aged and over 21 have better things to do on a Saturday night than baby-sit,” she said.

Greene found several sitters, including one college student who prefers weekends because she works and attends school during the week. But for others still job hunting, “you’re probably better off not putting up a picture,” she said.

Tracy Cesario of DuPage County also wasn’t worried about a Jude Law type of scandal. But she wanted a nanny with the experience and patience her newborn girl needs, someone who could stimulate her daughter and “make sure she had the freedom to put peas in her hair,” she said.

Cesario found Helen “Scotty” Heelan, a 62-year-old Scottish nanny who listed one of Cesario’s childhood neighbors as a reference. “She infinitely had more experience than my husband and I,” she said.

Heelan spends weekdays with Cesario’s daughter, but Cesario plans to use neighborhood teens on the weekends.

“We had our first neighborhood sitter last week. She was 16, cute as a button, talking about cheerleading practice. Made you realize how young she was,” Cesario said.

Her younger sitter has a much younger brother and came with enough experience to give Cesario peace of mind. But when it comes to long-term care, she says, older is better.

“It removes all the anxiety of me not being there,” she said. “It makes it much more bearable, knowing she’s safe.”