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Where to Look When You Need a Stand-In Sitter

When parents need a babysitter this holiday season, they may find that their usual choices – a local high school or college student, a relative or nearby friend – are on vacation or unavailable. When those options don't work, an increasing number will turn to a different source: the Internet.

In recent years, several Web-based baby-sitting services have sprung up, among them 4sitters.com, MyNannyCalledInSick.com and Student Sitters. The largest of these is the Chicago-based SitterCity.com, which boasts a database of 50,000 sitters serving 15 markets, including Washington and its suburbs.

Basically, "it's like a dating service but for parents and sitters," says Genevieve Thiers, founder and CEO of SitterCity.com. "It's all about bringing people together."

Here's how SitterCity and similar services work: Parents pay an annual membership fee, or an initial membership fee, between \$25 and \$40. (Some sites also have a monthly or quarterly fee, about \$5 to \$10.) Parents can log on to the site, specify when and where they need a sitter and identify transportation and other preferences. SitterCity, for example, offers 40 criteria from which parents and choose, including whether the sitter smokes, knows certain languages, or is available on holidays (New Year's Eve and Valentine's Day are the most popular).

Users receive contact information, references and, in some cases, feedback from other parents on their experience with particular sitters. Parents arrange their own interviews and negotiate pay with the sitter (some sites have minimum rates, others have suggested amounts).

These babysitters usually come cheaper than those from professional child-care agencies. Student Sitters' average rate is \$10 an hour, and typical rates for SitterCity are between \$10 and \$15, compared with \$13 and \$18 an hour (time-and-a-half on New Year's Eve) at Staffing Solutions @ Mothers' Aides, a Fairfax Station-based professional child-care and domestic referral agency (plus a \$30 fee for finding a sitter, which goes up \$40 during the holiday season).

Anne Guerin, president of Staffing Solutions, says the higher cost that agencies charge are justified. With her agency, parents "know whom they are getting," she says, whereas with online baby-sitting services, they "are taking chances." Unlike the unscreened

babysitters from online companies, sitters sent to homes from her company “go through our rigorous checking process,” including reference and criminal background checks, TB shots and CPR certification requirements.

But for overscheduled parents who don’t want to spend the money on an agency’s sitter and who don’t have time to post fliers on college and community bulletin boards or go through more traditional channels, the online services can be a practical tool.

“Parents are so busy, and if they are at all Internet-savvy this is a way for them to find a sitter,” says Deborah Brooks, CEO of Student Sitters, based in the District.

In many neighborhoods, parents don’t always know the local teens who could potentially baby-sit so Internet services strive to “create a virtual community” of parents and babysitters, she says.

Even where parents do know neighborhood teenagers, it’s not always easy to hire them for babysitting, notes Deborah W. Benke, publisher of Washington Parent magazine. In some parts of the Washington area “there is enough of an affluent population of high school kids who don’t want to baby-sit because they don’t need the money or because they are too busy,” she says.

For Wheaton mom Stephanie Schaefer, the online services Student Sitters proved to be a good solution recently when she needed someone to watch her 17-month-old son.

Before hiring a 21-year-old University of Maryland senior, Schaefer read her profile on the Student Sitters Web site, which described her prior baby-sitting experience and listed references. She like that the sitter had eight years of babysitting experience, including caring for children of a wide age range. Schaefer then called the three references listed and got two positive responses, she recalls (the third could not be easily reached). Still, she was a little concerned about leaving her child in the care of a stranger, but since she was using the sitter while working from her home office, she knew she’d be there if any problems arose.

“I was pleased with the result,” she says; she hired the sitter on three occasions. Schaefer added that while “it would be more ideal to have a personal reference for a sitter ... it’s just so hard to find a sitter [who has] time available – the sitters people have are tapped out.” Will she continue to use Web-based services? Absolutely, she says.

But other parents are reluctant to hire child-care providers over the Internet. When looking for a babysitter for her three children, ages 8, 6 and 2, Reston mom Suzanne Wheeler Klein says she prefers to use friends’ children, extended family members, camp counselors and young women at her workplace looking to supplement their income rather than to hunt for a sitter online. Even if she can’t find one through one of those channels, she wouldn’t hire one from a Web-based service. “Seems like too much time and energy to run a search, pay for hidden fees, then interview. I’d rather rent a movie and stay home,” she says.

Whichever method they choose for finding a babysitter, parents need to carefully evaluate whether the person is competent, says Ayesha Anwar, a youth health coordinator at Shady Grove Adventist Hospital in Gaithersburg who coordinates and teaches baby-sitting classes. She suggests meeting the sitter in person before hiring her and asking whether the person has taken first aid, CPR or baby-sitting course as well as whether she enjoys spending time with children. Other important questions include: “What would you do if the children started fighting or throwing a tantrum, if one started to choke, or if there were another emergency?” says Anwar.

Regardless of where you look for sitters, Anwar and others say, finding capable and trustworthy child-care can be harder at this time of year. “I would start looking now for [dates around] Christmas and New Year’s,” she says.