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**Reporter Jackie Bange**

## **WGN-TV Cover Story: Sitter City**

Most parents will tell you that finding a babysitter isn't always as easy as just dropping the kids off at grandma's house.

But, now it might be as easy as a click on your computer.

She is as active as any other one-year-old and has cornered the market on cute. So you might be surprised to learn that playful Ruthanne has life-threatening special needs.

Nobody knows that by touching her or having her eat something could cause a serious and possible deadly reaction.

Ruthanne is so severely allergic to eggs that even second-hand contact with make-up or lotions that contain egg proteins could be cause for emergency care.

"You have to take the cap off and you have to inject it into her thigh and hold it there for 60 seconds. In order to make sure she can keep breathing and her airways won't close up," says Kathleen Sandner, Ruthanne's mom.

As with most new moms, Kathleen Sandner was skeptical about leaving her baby with someone new, but given Ruthanne's condition, Kathleen had to take extra precautions. After asking friends for recommendations and even posting flyers on college campuses, she finally found her solution on-line.

"I needed to find somebody that knew CPR and first aid training and that was what my comfort level would be and that's the only way I would leave somebody with my daughter," Kathleen says.

Sitter-city.com is the brain-child of 27-year-old Genevieve Thiers.

A baby-sitter through-out college, she says each job would generate at least five new calls from other parents hoping she could help them, too.

"I began thinking these parents are desperate. They have nowhere to turn and there were thousands of wonderful baby-sitters in all the colleges at the city at that time and also recent graduates," Genevieve says. "But there was no way to link up to parents and so I started thinking, why isn't there a way?"

The class of 2000 graduate soon figured out how to turn her side job into a career. She patterned Sitter City after the popular online dating services, but instead of pairing up the lovelorn with other lonely hearts, this site matches desperate parents with available babysitters.

"We go to a market and we'll get 1,000 to 2,000 babysitters and we put them all in a database and you got all of their information in our database from their picture to 42 different criteria about them," Genevieve says. "Then if you're a parent, what you'll do is you'll join the site and it's \$39.99 for your first month and \$5 a month after that. That's all we charge."

And for babysitters like Catherine Lynch, who has found her fit in the Sandner home, Sitter City doesn't just make sense -- it also makes good money.

"Going to school and finding a part time job is really difficult, but babysitting, the hours are little bit more flexible and you decide or take on jobs that help you with time," Catherine says.

A match made in cyber-heaven. The site operates in 20 major cities and has a database of more than 50,000 sitters. Only recently, did the 5-year-old Chicago-based company start accommodating children with special needs.

There are registered caregivers who are comfortable handling situations like Ruthanne's food allergies, as well as conditions like Down Syndrome or Epilepsy. Parents can even specify language proficiency.

"So a simple search would be I need somebody Friday from 4-6 that has a car and speaks Spanish and you can find that, you just click submit and all the you know sitters pop right up and you can choose a few and contact them," Genevieve says. So simple... This parent says it's genius.

"It's like picking out or making your own sandwich. You know exactly if you want lettuce, mayonnaise and mustard. I needed CPR, I needed first aid and Sitter City let me make my choices and get the exact sitter that I wanted," Kathleen says.

Just like the online dating services, the operators of "Sitter-City" say they only offer a way to link people -- you meet and exchange services at your own risk. Parents are strongly advised to conduct further screenings like checking references and performing background checks before leaving their child alone with anyone they meet online.

For more information, go to [www.sittercity.com](http://www.sittercity.com)