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By Sue Shellenbarger

Surfing for Sitters: Employers Help Working Parents Find Child Care Online

WHEN PAUL OCON needed an occasional baby sitter for his three children recently, he turned to an unusual source -- his employer, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

In a new wrinkle in employee benefits, Children's is offering discounted access to an online baby-sitter search service, SitterCity.com. At a two-hour event earlier this month, Mr. Ocon, director of clinical-care services for the nonprofit hospital concern, met 18 local sitters from the Web site's cast of thousands. He is following up this week with plans to interview the three top candidates.

SitterCity.com is among a handful of fast-growing Web sites that are transforming one of parents' most nettlesome challenges: finding a good baby sitter. The sites work much like dating site Match.com, posting profiles for thousands of sitters, sorted by location, for parents to contact after paying a fee. After that, it's caveat emptor, with screening left up to parents. The access to scores of names offers tremendous new conveniences to parents. It also opens the door, however, to risks for parents and sitters alike -- especially teens who may post personal information online.

A few employers, including Children's and Carolinas HealthCare System, a nonprofit Charlotte, N.C., hospital concern, are providing employees discounted access to SitterCity.com, which usually costs \$39.99 for the first month, and \$9.99 a month thereafter. At AMR Corp.'s American Airlines, a 300-employee working-parents group sanctioned by the airline has arranged discounted SitterCity.com access for employees. Also, bSwift, Chicago, a benefits software and administration concern, last month started including SitterCity.com discounts in the benefits packages it offers its 3,000 corporate clients.

Carrying the Web-dating parallel one step further, Children's earlier this month held a SitterCity.com "SpeedSitting" event, which Mr. Ocon attended. Modeled after speed dating, the promotion enabled 60 employees to meet 50 sitters face to face in five-minute intervals marked by a ringing bell. Though his wife found the idea of SpeedSitting "a foreign concept," says Mr. Ocon, he came away satisfied.

The sites typically offer free listings to sitters seeking jobs ranging from an occasional Saturday night to permanent part-time or full-time posts. SitterCity.com, based in Chicago, claims to list 158,000 sitters, an estimate that includes sitters active on the site

in the past four to five months, a spokeswoman says. Other sites boast 15,000 to 22,000 listings, with about 20% to 40% coming from college students. Some sites also post eBay-style parent feedback on individual sitters.

For a subscription fee that varies by site, parents can search the database of sitters within a designated distance of their homes, or post ads. The minimum age for sitter listings varies by Web site from 13 to 18. Pay rates range from about \$5 to \$18 an hour.

The Web sites are expanding fast, posting 50% to 100% annual increases in parent sign-ups, the sites say. Michael Cravens, chief executive of BabySitters.com in Potomac Falls, Va., says that when he founded the site in 2000, "the reaction I got was, 'That's a dumb idea. Parents aren't going to go on the Internet'" to find a sitter. Now, he says, people say, " 'That's a great idea.' "

Natasha Wilson, a part-time night-shift respiratory therapist at Children's Healthcare, had been trying for weeks through word-of-mouth to find a sitter to watch her five-month-old son one day a week while she caught up on sleep. Through SitterCity.com, she found 15 candidates. The 21-year-old woman she hired has CPR training and has been doing the job well for six months.

After moving to Reston, Va., Jackie Colwell wasn't well enough acquainted with neighbors to find a sitter for her eight-month-old child. BabySitters.com gave her access to 15 candidates, which she winnowed down to one woman who has now been working for her for almost two years.

For sitters, the increased marketability of their services is like graduating from holding a neighborhood garage sale to selling items on eBay. Samantha Hamil, 27, Ashburn, Va., says extra income from the 20 new baby-sitting clients she found on BabySitters.com has helped her move out of her parents' home into her own apartment.

Although no abuses have come to light so far, the sites do open the door to potential problems. They are basically matchmaking services, lacking the benefit of the neighborhood grapevine that can help parents eliminate bad apples. Screening of online sitters falls to parents. While all the sites post liability disclaimers to that effect, the cautionary messages aren't always sinking in: Several parents I interviewed erroneously thought the posted sitters had already had background checks.

Most of the sites post articles and tips on screening. For candidates over age 18, background checks are a good idea. A background check requires written permission from the sitter and may cost as much as \$100 to \$200, but it can sharply reduce the risk of hiring a sitter who has something to hide.

There are risks for sitters, too. For example, BabySitters.com posts home addresses and phone numbers for sitters, who can be as young as 13, raising the potential risk of attracting predators. Mr. Cravens says many sitters opt to withhold personal information.

Also, the fact that users have to pay by credit card reduces the likelihood of abuse, he says.

Other sites have built-in safeguards for young teens. SitterCafe.com verifies sitter-seeking parents' identity through a cross-check of drivers' license numbers and other data. The site also limits younger sitters to jobs within five miles of their homes, and notifies their parents by mail.

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Doing the Homework

Tips on hiring babysitters online

- Question at least two references in-depth
- Interview the candidate carefully and ask for specific examples of child-care experience
- Consider doing a background check on applicants over age 18
- Arrange a sitter "tryout" while you're present with children