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Child-Care Labor: Deciding What to Pay Your Sitter

What to pay the occasional Saturday-night baby sitter may seem like a simple matter. But my talks with parents about the topic often end with an anxious question. One mother told me she pays her sitter "above the market," then in the next breath asked, "Is that above the market, do you think?" Other parents think they pay well but are mystified that sitters never come back.

THE GOING RATE

Getting advice on how to set sitter pay:

- Check the sitter's references for pay history
- See www.sittercity.com/rate_calculator.html
- Ask friends, neighbors and local nanny agency

As a pricing puzzle, paying the sitter ranks right up there with valuing mortgage-backed securities. Sitter pay ranges wildly, based on a sitter's age, credentials, experience, job duties and region. Couple that with the fact that sitter-pay rates are soaring at triple the overall inflation rate, and you've got a real pricing mess.

Average pay for a teenage baby sitter for one child has risen 39% in the past five years, says Runzheimer International, a Rochester, Wis., consulting firm that researches living costs; the consumer-price index rose 13% over the period.

L.J. Kolek, 36, Westport, Conn., who grew up thinking of baby sitting as a \$3- to \$4-an-hour job, sometimes finds that hard to swallow. After paying an experienced, college-age sitter \$14 an hour recently for an evening when his son slept nonstop, he recalls thinking, "I can't believe I'm paying this amount for someone to just watch my television."

But he and other parents are increasingly willing to pay more for highly qualified sitters. Jessica Griffith, St. Paul, Minn., says that although she pays her sitter, a well-qualified woman in her twenties, more than six times what she once earned herself as a teenage sitter, "we'd rather go out less often and have the peace of mind."

Regional differences in pay further cloud the picture. A teenage sitter for one child can command an average of \$14.84 in the New York City area, more than twice the \$7.33 paid sitters in Dallas, Runzheimer says. Rates average \$9 in Washington, D.C.; \$8.67 in Chicago, and \$8.64 in Los Angeles, based on data collected by researchers living in 350 locations.

Add more children to the mix; ask a sitter to do light housekeeping or provide her own transportation, or insist on a sitter in college or beyond, and rates rise sharply. Rates

offered by parents on www.Babysitters.com, a sitter-search site where 60% or more of parents have two or more children and want a college-age or adult sitter willing to do extra tasks, reflect these premiums. Such parents are offering \$16 to \$18 an hour in New York; \$14 to \$16 in Chicago or Washington; \$13 to \$16 in Los Angeles and \$10 to \$12 in Dallas, says Michael Cravens, Babysitters.com CEO.

In a morass like this, you need a pay strategy. First, figure out the range you can afford, then set your rate at the low end, says Michael Gerard, executive director of www.SitterCafe.com, a sitter-search site. This will enable you to manage bonuses, tips and other extras. "Sitters won't remember that you paid a bit less per hour than some parents, but they'll always remember that you give them an extra \$5 or \$10 tip," he says.

Second, be thoughtful about those extras. Genevieve Thiers, CEO of www.SitterCity.com, a sitter-search site, recommends giving a \$1- to \$3-an-hour raise after a year, and doubling pay on a sitter's last job before the new year. Consider adding a few dollars for commuting, especially for short jobs, she says. Jean Dolan, Newtown, Pa., pays a bonus when a sitter tidies up the house without being asked.

Finally, don't make the common mistake of assuming money is all that matters to a sitter. Several sitters I interviewed ranked pay as only the No. 3 incentive to stick with a family, behind feeling safe in the home and feeling trusted and respected by parents. Examples include sticking to agreed-upon pay rates, refraining from calling home every half-hour, and returning home when you say you will.

"What's important to me," says Torrye Hart, a 20-year-old sitter from Travelers Rest, S.C., "is the interpersonal relationships with the family."