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By Jennifer Graham

Adventures in Finding a Baby Sitter

Even the most devoted of parents eventually reach a point where worries about the effects of separation anxiety -- on themselves or on their loved ones -- give way to a single, urgent need: to get away from their kids for a while. Child neglect laws being what they are, this need can be met in only one way -- by summoning another person to assume care of the children. It is at this point that the problem begins.

In decades past, grandparents lived nearby and were eager to step in. Uncles and aunts, too. Neighborhoods teemed with earnest teenagers looking to earn a few bucks. Alfred Hitchcock once said that a good film was one that was worth the price of dinner, admission and a baby sitter. Back then, the baby sitter was the cheapest part of the evening.

No more. Today the price of a baby sitter would horrify even Hitchcock. Sitters command twice, sometimes three times, the minimum wage. Over a stretch of hours, they can earn a paycheck that makes a restaurant bill and movie ticket look cheap. And if you want a baby sitter to come back again, you may have to offer her dinner and a DVD, too. Web sites abound with tips on how to retain a good sitter: stock the refrigerator with high-end snacks, offer Internet access, pay top dollar, tip liberally, offer gifts, chauffeur the sitter to and fro, even put your kids to bed early so that she need do no more than, well, sit.

That's what Yara Delvalle, a 30-year-old mother of two in Oceanport, N.J., is advertising on the Internet classified site Craig's List: "I need a sitter for Friday nights and sometimes Sunday nights, too. I don't leave the house until my kids are fast asleep so all you would have to do is watch TV until I got back." Two days after posting the ad, Ms. Delvalle had received only two responses, and they were from women who wanted \$10 an hour to watch TV while her children, ages six and seven, slept. "I don't think so," Ms. Delvalle told them.

She is still looking, as are thousands of other parents who would prefer a family member or trusted teen but, finding none available, have turned to the Internet. Genevieve Thiers isn't a parent, but she knows what parents are going through these days. She baby-sat her way through Boston College in the late 1990s and quickly discerned that the No. 1 need of new parents, after a good night's sleep, is a reliable baby sitter. She discerned as well that such sitters are in short supply. "Every time I would do a job, five parents would call me the next day, and they were all desperate," Ms. Thiers told me.

Ms. Thiers, 28, graduated in 2000, and the next year she printed 20,000 business fliers at Staples and posted them at Boston-area colleges. Within about three weeks, she had recruited about 600 baby sitters and launched Sittercity.com, a Web-based business matching parents and baby sitters. "I'd like to say that it was time for it, but actually, the idea was late," Ms. Thiers said in an interview. "In five years, it's become an amazing industry. It's the new face of child care, of baby sitting."

Sites like Sittercity.com and Babysitters.com allow sitters to post their profiles without charge and parents to peruse them for a fee. Most sites do not rigorously screen the sitters other than to verify their ages, but they recommend that parents do some screening themselves. They even give tips for interviewing potential sitters. Parents who use the services are essentially buying baby-sitter names and phone numbers -- information that is still free on many community bulletin boards but increasingly rare by word-of-mouth. It is now considered a faux pas to ask a friend for the number of her sitter. "That would be like moving in on someone else's husband," Ms. Thiers said.

What happened? Fifteen years ago, when Ms. Delvalle was a teenager in New Jersey, she baby-sat regularly and was happy to get \$2 an hour "if that." Why the labor-market crunch since then, and the wage jump? For one thing, baby sitting has been given a gloss of specialization. In the early 1990s, the American Red Cross introduced a baby-sitter certification program, a six-hour class that covers a range of child-care basics, from burping an infant to identifying a life-threatening injury and knowing how to respond. The course is aimed at sitters ages 11 through 17, although adults may take it as well. The Red Cross certifies about 121,000 sitters each year, spokeswoman Pamela King says.

But just as more parents began to seek baby sitters with formal training, teenagers had less time to obtain it and less inclination to baby-sit at all. The "hurried child" that sociologist David Elkind wrote about in the 1980s became the overscheduled teen of the '90s. Modern high-schoolers are increasingly under pressure to graduate with glittering résumés that will propel them into prestigious schools and, eventually, lucrative jobs. "Sat on couch watching TV while neighbors' children slept" doesn't contribute a lot.

Katherine Geithman is, by all measures, a parent's dream baby sitter. A junior at McLean High School in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., Miss Geithman has more experience taking care of young children than some new parents do; she has three siblings, 13, 11 and 9. She is an honor student, an athlete and a Girl Scout and sings in her church choir. The money she makes baby sitting goes into her college account.

The problem is that, after going to school, doing her homework and participating in extracurricular activities, she has fewer than three hours left for baby sitting each week, and those hours are much in demand. "Sometimes I've been offered so much money that I've refused it," Miss Geithman said. "I've been offered ridiculous amounts of money, like \$12 an hour for one kid."

For every teenager like Miss Geithman who wants to baby-sit but doesn't have the time, there are several more who don't want to and don't have to, whose cellphone and college

account are funded by mom and dad. "When I was younger, I had to work to make money for myself," says Amy Craig Martiner, a mother of two in Philadelphia. "I didn't get an allowance. I think that dynamic has changed." Ms. Martiner has used the Internet to find a sitter and has no qualms about it. "It's where all the young people are now," she said.

But for others, the Internet is troublingly impersonal and maybe a little dodgy. Kelly Curtis of Charleston, S.C., who has five children ranging in age from 1 to 8, has missed weddings and other events because she couldn't find a sitter she knew. For her, the Internet is not an option. "I haven't, and wouldn't," she said. "I'm leery of that." Mrs. Curtis and her husband have resigned themselves to a sparse social life while their children are young. The upside: No one has to worry about separation anxiety.

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