

With no place to turn, parents seek sitters online

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By Dina Gerdeman
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QUINCY, Mass. -

When Erin Waldner moved to Hingham, Mass., about a year ago, she began asking other moms if they could recommend any babysitters for the occasional Saturday night out.

But she found her friends to be quite reluctant to share sitters.

"When other moms get really good sitters that they love, they don't want to give them up," Waldner said. "People were nice about it, but a little hesitant, and I was having trouble finding people through friends."

So Waldner turned to the Web and registered with a site called **Sittercity.com**, where she found a vast array of local babysitters to choose from. She has hired more than a half dozen sitters through the site.

"It made me nervous at first to go in blindly and just pick girls off the Internet," she said. "My son has a tree nut allergy, so I won't leave my kids with just anyone. But I have had really good luck."

Parents don't have to rely only on word of mouth to find a decent babysitter to watch their children, whether it's for a couple hours on a Friday night or for 40 hours or more during the week. The Internet has provided a quick and easy resource for parents and babysitters alike on sites like **Sittercity.com** and **Babysitters.com**.

"It can be very hard for some parents to part with their children, especially a newborn," said **Genevieve Thiers**, founder of **Sittercity.com**, which charges parents a \$40 opening fee and \$10 month-by-month fee or about \$100 for the year. "However, it comes down to finding the right match. If you find the right sitter or nanny, it's not as painful. We consider ourselves safer than using the girl next door."

The amount of information available about potential hires is astounding, including everything from a babysitter's age, experience and wage requirements to where they live, their references, and in some cases a background check that provides information about traffic violations and any criminal offenses.

Sharon Simpson of Brockton, Mass., who has a 5-year-old son and 4-month-old daughter, said the Babysitters.com site gave her some peace of mind because she was able to run a background check on a potential sitter and check the woman's references before ever meeting her.

"It's all about screening people," she said. "You need to check people out. You're giving them access to your house and your children. If I were finding a sitter through someone I knew, I don't know how I would have done a background check. This took that mystery out of the puzzle."

Many parents have been known to find babysitters on free sites like Craigslist, but others choose to pay fees for babysitter sites, partly to get the extra information they provide.

"None of the information on Craigslist is vetted by anybody," noted Mike Cravens, chief executive officer of Babysitters.com, which charges parents \$30 for three months of access, then \$9 for every month afterward. "And a lot of times the teenager who lives up the street is just fine, but you have a wider selection online. What really matters to a lot of parents these days is that it's convenient. They don't have to bug their friends and family."

And on the flip side, babysitters are enjoying the spoils of the sitter sites, where they are typically able to market themselves at no charge.

Clarese Deibel, 20, of Quincy, posted her profile on **Sittercity.com** and within three days she was babysitting for a parent. She noted that the information on the site runs both ways, allowing babysitters to find out about families before deciding whether to take on jobs.

"We get a lot of information about the families from the site as well," Deibel said. "The family can tell about themselves and their children."

Besides, finding work through the sites could put more money in sitters' pockets.

Jess Bilbo, 20, of Cohasset, Mass., had been getting babysitting jobs through word of mouth previously, but in April she registered on the **Sittercity** Web site and has noticed that parents tend to offer more money there, knowing they are competing with other parents for the best child care providers.

Bilbo's babysitting rate before the online site was \$10 an hour, but she noticed parents on the site were willing to pay much more.

"The job I applied to had posted \$14 to \$16 an hour," she said. "I wouldn't have even asked for that much, but I definitely think there's a sense of competitiveness (among parents). I don't even look at the (ads) listed at a lower rate. There are so many options, I don't need to."

Bilbo said she initially felt a little uneasy providing some of the personal information the site asked for, including her Social Security number for an optional background check. But she said all in all, the tradeoff of more work at a higher wage is worth it.

"It's a much easier way to look for jobs than word of mouth through friends," Bilbo said. "It gives you more options."

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