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## Baby sitters a click away

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BY [RENA FULKA](#) Staff writer

Like many parents, Jody Smith is picky about who she hires to baby-sit her children.

While searching for the perfect caregiver, the Orland Park mother of two junior high schoolers intentionally set the bar high.

"I wanted a college student for the summer," Smith said.

"I wanted someone who likes to be around kids and knows how to structure activities for my kids. And I needed someone to referee fights and drive my kids where they needed to go."

To gain access to a vast pool of candidates, Smith turned to Sittercity.com, a Chicago-based Web site that attracts more than 500,000 users from across the nation.

Parents pay \$40 for the first 30 days, then \$10 monthly, to view hundreds of profiles of sitters living within a few miles of their homes. Most Chicago area ZIP codes fetch 15,000 candidates or more.

"I thought it would be worth the \$40 if I found someone, otherwise I'd be in a huge bind," Smith said.

"And it worked out great."

Gone are the days when parents have to rely solely on their family, friends and neighbors to find baby sitters.

In today's high-tech society, a number of Web sites cater to the need by providing photographs, biographies and references for a fee.

Smith and other south suburban parents say the process is simple.

"I went online and found three girls who were at the top of my list in regards to what they wrote about themselves in their biographies. I e-mailed them, and they responded immediately," Smith said.

"I posted the job online, too, but I had to cut off the posting because I got too many responses to deal with. In retrospect, I wouldn't have had to put the ad in. I hired one of the first three girls I interviewed and didn't have to go any further."

Smith interviewed the candidates in her home and chose a nursing school major.

"I called all her references, and they were just glowing," Smith said.

"Safety is a huge issue for me, and I felt a nursing student might have an increased awareness for safety. If something happens to your child, you hope your sitter is savvy enough to know what to do."

Genaya Syverson turned to Sittercity.com after moving to Chicago's Beverly community.

"I'm not from Chicagoland. I have no relatives or connections here. So this is a good way for me to find a sitter," Syverson said.

"I was looking for someone to baby-sit 10 to 15 hours a week, who would care for my two children and handle

meal time, bedtime and daily fun," Syverson said.

"I wanted someone with experience with little children who would be engaged with my two kids, not just sitting there watching TV. And I wanted someone who was mature enough and had at least a high school diploma."

Syverson posted the position and received 20 responses from local care givers almost immediately.

"This was my first experience, and the sitters found me," said Syverson, who interviewed five candidates by phone and one in person.

She hired a non-smoker who was willing to drive to and from the Syverson home on her own.

"She worked for us for seven or eight months, and now she's moving," Syverson said.

"I took out a one-year membership for Sittercity, so I could go in and try again periodically if my sitter didn't work out. But I haven't had to do it until now. When I'm in a real need for a sitter, I know I have something to fall back on."

Kathleen Rendino, who recently moved from Orland Park to Channahon, said the sitter she found online has become a dear friend.

"I have a relationship with Christie. She's my buddy. She's part of our family now," Rendino said.

Parents aren't the only winners at Sittercity.com.

Care providers ages 17 and older can post extensive resumes on the site for free, listing their skills, preferences, schedules, hourly rates and neighborhood location.

Some submit to the background checks offered through Sittercity.com for a \$10 fee. Others opt to run background checks on potential employers.

Most initial contact between parents and sitters takes place via e-mail accounts provided by the service, allowing users to keep personal e-mail addresses private.

"The Web is so new, there's a perception of it being unsafe. But we're safer than hiring the girl next door," Sittercity founder Genevieve Thiers said.

"We've had a perfect record for seven years, with no lawsuits."

The Web site conducts security scans, and offers daily phone support from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Online profile pages contain space earmarked for reviews.

"Sitters can leave feedback on parents, and parents can leave feedback on sitters. So there's accountability on both sides," Thiers said.

Jillian Neilsson, a Mokena teacher, posted her resume on the site last year in search of a part-time job.

"It's the easiest way to connect with a family," Neilsson said.

"It took me one month to find a family to work for, and it worked out great because we both wanted the same thing: after-school care. I baby-sat for them for the entire school year after school and during the summer, too."

Corrie Wurtz logged on hoping to work from her Oak Forest home.

"I was working in a day care center when I got pregnant, and I wanted to stay home with my son," said Wurtz, who was hired by three families in two years.

"I upload pictures for people to see me and my family so they know who they're talking to before they meet me," Wurtz said.

"I do one-on-one interviews to see if their children and my child play well together. Then I set up two or three play dates for the kids to play together and get used to each other."

Joanna Piatek, of Orland Park, learned firsthand how important online biographies can be.

She posted a simple resume when she moved to Orland Park four years ago, but received few responses.

"I redid my profile in September and found a job in a week," said Piatek, an elementary education major at St. Xavier University.

"Now people come asking for me. I work for three different families, one every day during the week, one on weekends and another one once a month in the evening."

In addition to caring for the children, Piatek's responsibilities may include popping dirty dishes into the dishwasher, cleaning up after the kids or driving them to lessons or camp.

The situation changes with each employer, and not every family is a good fit.

"I don't like working with big dogs, so I always check for that," Piatek said.

Though she receives a flood of SitterCity e-mails, Piatek checks out site postings by parents, too.

That's how she hooked up with Kari Gambotz, a Palos Heights consultant who subscribed last April.

Gambotz said she posted a summer position at 4:30 p.m. one Saturday and received more than 200 responses by noon the next day.

She narrowed the field by zeroing in on sitters who lived nearby.

After conducting phone interviews and meeting with three candidates in her home, Gambotz hired Piatek for the long term.

"I wanted a relationship with someone that went beyond the summer, and I was impressed by the immediate warmth she had with my children," said Gambotz, a mother of three.

"Joanna is a teacher and my boys are going into first grade, so I asked that 30 minutes a day be dedicated to their school work. She was also the driving force in helping our daughter give up her pacifier."

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