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By Chris Ayres

## **The babysitter from cyberspace**

### **LA Notebook: Imagine the terror at leaving my child in the care of an internet nanny**

A couple of days ago I met a complete stranger on the internet, invited her over to my house, showed her the room where my son was sleeping, then went out to a party at my neighbour's house -- where I promptly began to hyperventilate.

What on earth had I just done? This woman not only had the life of my eight-month-old son in her hands, but she also had access to my computers, my filing cabinets, my car keys, my...

“Relax!” hissed my wife. “Everything's fine. We checked all the references, remember?”

But in my head, nothing was fine. My son was probably already being dangled from a second-floor window as part of some YouTube babysitter stunt. The cats had almost certainly been flushed down the toilet, and the kitchen was undoubtedly knee-deep in water from an unsupervised tap. My life as I knew it was over.

Deep down, of course, I knew the reason for my paranoia: we had met our babysitter on **Sittercity.com**, a kind of Facebook for parents. Now I'm no technophobe. I've bought cars online. I've sold stocks online. I even met my wife online (she bought my sofa from Craigslist.org). Yet even though my son wouldn't technically exist without the internet, the knowledge that I had hired a childminder from a website was sending me half way to the psychiatric ward.

Part of the problem, I think, is the looming shadow of the Madeleine McCann case. Thanks to that tragic story I now approach all child-minding dilemmas by taking a kind of warped McCann test: if something went horribly wrong, how negligent/guilty would I look when interviewed on Larry King Live? Let's face it, explaining that you met your babysitter online wouldn't exactly get you nominated as Father of the Year.

But perhaps babysitting represents the final frontier of trust for the internet. Sure, it's always better to enlist family members with childminding tasks, but if your nearest relatives are 3,000 miles away, and if your friends are all single and more familiar with the advanced settings of Gmail than those of an eight-month-old, what are you to do?

Besides, doesn't it make more sense to hire someone who qualifies for the job rather than someone who qualifies as a relative?

On **Sittercity.com**, sitters post CVs and YouTube profiles (being webgenie is a crucial asset in the 21st-century workforce), and clients rate them using a five-star system. For a fee, you can even do a background check.

In the end, of course, the babysitter we hired was fine, although we continued our search. The most recent candidate we interviewed was another young woman on a summer break after graduating. I asked her what she had studied. "Neuroscience at Harvard med," came the swift reply. Yes, that's right: we now have a trained brain surgeon as our babysitter, and all for the rate of \$14 an hour. Next time I go out on a date with my wife, I think I'll be able to relax.