

The Washington Post

Sunday, April 20, 2008

By Leah Ariniello

Special to The Washington Post

Page N02

Hey, Mom and Dad, Find Me a Sitter?

Just when you settle back into your seat at the restaurant and finally lock eyes with your spouse after a hectic workweek, your preschooler starts gagging on the ice cube you thought was a genius way to keep her occupied. After a few frantic thumps on her back, she spits it up, along with some half-digested hot-pink yogurt, all over your cashmere V-neck.

Okay, you get it, even without the commentary from a nearby table: It's time to call a babysitter.

These days, however, finding a sitter is no simple task. Chances are that your neighborhood high-schooler, once a mainstay on the babysitting scene, has a packed calendar. So you'll have to think a little more broadly and do more screening, but the good news is you can find available sitters if you know where to search. For example, you could...

TAP YOUR INNER CIRCLE. A great babysitter might be right under your nose. Perhaps a friend's nanny needs extra hours. Or check with the caretakers at your child's preschool, aftercare program or camp program. Other options include the workers in the child-care center at your church or gym, and even your pool lifeguards. Often these people have decent experience and will moonlight for extra cash.

Taking this avenue has advantages, says Stefanie Bloom of McLean, who snagged a babysitter from the child-care center at her gym. "I was able to see how good she was with kids and knew that the gym had interviewed her already and did background checks."

SAMPLE A SITTING SERVICE. A slew of businesses can help match you with a sitter in the Washington area for a fee.

Online, you'll find sites fashioned after Internet dating services, including **Sittercity.com**, Student Sitters (<http://https://www.student-sitters.com>) and BabySitters.com. Typically you pay a monthly membership fee of about \$10 that allows you to post jobs, browse profiles of sitters looking for work in your area and contact candidates. Some sites, including Sittercity and BabySitters.com, also provide access to background checks.

If you prefer a method more akin to speed dating, you might like MommyMixer (<http://www.mommymixer.com>), an Austin-based company that holds events at hip locations where parents can mingle with babysitter candidates from area colleges. Its first local event will be April 29 at 7 p.m. at the Nest Egg (11941 Grand Commons Ave.) in Fairfax. The mixers, which cost mothers \$100, require advance registration.

Keep in mind that these services are matchers, not screeners. For added help with hiring, check out the more traditional nanny agencies, many of which offer pre-screened babysitters for date nights and other occasional needs. Agencies in the area include Staffing Solutions @ Mothers' Aides (<http://www.mystaffingsolutions.com>), Metropolitan Nannies (<http://www.metropolitannannies.com>) and White House Nannies Inc. (<http://www.whitehousenannies.com>).

"It's more expensive to do it through an agency, but you get more," says Barbara Kline, founder of Bethesda-based White House Nannies. With her service, for example, an annual registration fee of \$250 gets you access to babysitters who have been vetted. Parents typically pay \$25 per job and the babysitter's negotiated fee, often \$15 to \$20 an hour.

POST A REQUEST. You can also try sending out a babysitter request through an increasing number of outlets, from your neighborhood paper to free community Listservs and forums on such sites as DC Urban Moms & Dads (<http://www.dcurbanmom.com>) and Craigslist (<http://www.craigslist.org>).

Also, many universities have free services that allow you to post babysitting jobs online. Local options include American University (<http://www.jobcorps.ausg.org>), George Washington University (<http://gwired.gwu.edu/career/GWork>) and the University of Maryland (http://www.careercenter.umd.edu/employer/services/quickbucks_emp.asp). You can also send your request to students at multiple schools for free through Zippyjobs (<http://www.zippyjobs.com>).

Casting such a wide net can be nerve-wracking, because you don't know what you'll dredge up, says Lisa Dubois of Falls Church, who posted a request on Craigslist. But after wading through responses, conducting interviews and verifying information through reference checks and Google searches, she found a keeper. "We like [our babysitter] so much we invited her to live at our house this summer when she's off from school."

Finders Keepers

Once you find that dream sitter, know how to make the relationship work. For advice, we spoke with Chicago resident **Genevieve Thiers, 30, a former babysitter and founder of Sittercity.com**, whose book, "Love at First Sit" (Sittercity Press, \$17.99), is scheduled to be released next month.

Set expectations up front. In general, your sitter should be on time, care for your child and clean up any mess he or she makes. You can request extras, says Thiers, but make sure you ask in the initial interview. Also review "house rules" such as phone and TV use so everyone's on the same page.

Treat your sitter like family. Let the sitter know your house is her house. For example, she should feel free to eat the food in the kitchen.

Don't be cheap. If you want to hold on to a good sitter, it's better to overpay slightly than underpay, Thiers says. Average hourly rates for a sitter age 17 or older are \$12 to \$13.50 in the D.C. area, she says. (To get rate ideas for your specific situation, check Sittercity's rate calculator at http://www.sittercity.com/rate_calculator.html.) And each year, consider a raise of at least \$1 an hour and a holiday tip, typically double the price of one job.