

In Home Child Care: Making the Match

Cuidado de niños en su hogar: Cómo establecer el vínculo

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"I was so nervous about finding a good caregiver for my six-month-old daughter, Sarah, I almost decided not to go back to work," remembers Carole Smalls, a Los Angeles accountant. "But then I found out there were reliable employment agencies and services to check out applicants' backgrounds, and that gave me the peace of mind I needed. We found a wonderful woman. Sarah loves her, and she's been with us for a year now."

Moms opt for in-home child care for a variety of reasons - they may travel often, or work hours that don't conform to center's schedules, or they may simply prefer one-on-one care for their child in their own home. Whatever the reason, when a child is not in a group setting where adult supervision comes from several sources, the selection becomes all the more important.

"Your choice is also crucial because of the way babies learn. Your little one's relationship with his caregiver will have a tremendous influence on the development of his emotional and social skills," says Barbara Willer of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). "So you want to find the best person available. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to be sure you make the right choice."

Here are some ways to streamline the process of interviewing and selecting the right person.

DEFINE YOUR CAREGIVER'S JOB

Before you set up the first interview, clarify what you need.

- Will the caregiver need to be on the premises around the clock (live in) or only during certain hours (live out)?
- What days and what hours will she be required to work?
- Will she need to drive - and have a car at her disposal?
- What household responsibilities - such as doing laundry, cleaning, ironing, cooking - will she have in addition to child care?
- What are your rules on smoking?
- If you have older children, what are her duties and hours regarding them? Will she need to pick them up from school? Help them with homework? Provide transportation to and from after-school activities?

Once you've answered these questions, write out a list of your job requirements and keep it on hand for interviews later on.

DETERMINE SALARY AND BENEFITS

Forging a good relationship with your caregiver depends on your compensating her fairly for the work required. The following question will help you establish a salary and benefit package you can both live with.

- What can you afford to pay? How many hours of care can you expect for that salary? (For the going rate in your area, call the International Nanny Association at 1-800-297-1477.)
- What benefits will you offer? Health insurance? Paid vacation and holidays?
- What will you pay for overtime hours? For a live-in Nanny, this is crucial. Just because she is on the premises doesn't mean you can expect her to be at your beck and call.

If her hours are 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. four days a week, plus one day with a late evening, you have to ask her - and pay her - for any service beyond those times. Be sure to make that clear up front.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR A CAREGIVER

When it comes time to start your search, the first thing to do is ask friends and colleagues if they can recommend anyone. You may even want to check and post notices in your local bank, bookstore, YMCA, supermarket or on community bulletin boards. You can also contact a nanny agency or au pair program.

Nanny agencies: A nanny agency should be able to present you with a list of pre-screened, qualified candidates. But not all agencies are created equal. So to make sure you're dealing with one that provides top-notch candidates, you'll need to do some research. Here's advice from Kimberly Porrazzo, director of the Southern California Nanny Center in Lake Forest, California, and author of *The Nanny Kit* (to order a copy for \$15.00, call 714-859-9134), on how to proceed.

1. Find out from your state Department of Consumer Affairs if nanny agencies are required to be licensed.
2. If your state requires a license, make sure the agency you're considering has one.
3. Find out how long the agency has been in business. If it's been around for a while, this increases the likelihood

"The mission of Community Resources for Children is to provide resources for the early care and education of children in Napa County"

that it has been doing things the right way.

4. Find out the owner's educational and career background. Look for schooling and experience in human-resources management or early childhood education.
5. Check out prospective agencies by requesting the names of three customers who hired a caregiver within the last six months. That way you'll be talking to recent clients who can tell you how the agency treated them and if their candidate worked out or not. (Clearly, the agency is only going to refer you to people who will speak well of them, but you can still tease out useful nuggets of information with careful questioning.)
6. Ask the agency if and how they pre-screen their candidates. They should be checking references, running Department of Motor Vehicles check and conducting a thorough criminal background check (and that can take some doing). Be forewarned. Although there are reputable nanny employment agencies, not all are scrupulous about screening their placements. If they can't show you documentation of the screening for the person they're proposing, don't use them.
7. Check with the Better Business Bureau to see if any complaints have been lodged against them.

To find the names of agencies in your area, look in the Yellow Pages or contact the International Nanny association at 1-800-297-1477 for a copy of the Annual Directory of Nanny Training Programs, Placement Agencies and Special Services (consultants, insurance people, etc.) It costs \$16.95.

You may also want to search for a nanny through one of the 15 nanny schools in this country. Most offer their graduates a placement or referral service. To obtain a list of schools, call the American Council for Nanny Schools at 517-686-9417 (you need to evaluate the school and make sure they do satisfactory screening of their graduates. If the school has no screening mechanism, you'll want to hire a screening service to do the job for you. See "Check the Record.").

Au pair programs: A typical au pair is a young woman or man between the ages of 18 and 26 who in exchange for room and board, a small salary and a chance to live and work in the United States provides child care for the host family. Au pairs live with their host family for one year.

The au pair's duties are mostly centered on child care, with a maximum workweek of 45 hours, one weekend off per month and two weeks paid vacation.

In order to qualify for the program, the young person must speak English, have at least a high school degree and an international drivers license, according to William Gertz, senior vice president, American Institute for Foreign Study, the organization that launched legal au pair programs in the United States. The au pair must also go through a

screening process that checks her references, police, and health records, and provides a psychological profile.

Typical fees paid by parents average about \$200 a week. This includes the application fee and cost of the airplane ticket.

There are eight companies authorized by the United States Information Agency to bring au pairs to this country. To obtain a list of authorized companies and to find out more information, contact the U.S. Information Agency at 202-401-9810.

SCREEN CANDIDATES OVER THE PHONE

Once you've selected an agency, school or au pair program as your source of potential candidates, you're ready to start the interview process. The first round - on the phone - will allow you to winnow out the most unsuitable candidates.

When you speak to the person take note of the following:

- Did she call at the scheduled time?
- Is her voice energetic?
- Does she speak clearly and communicate effectively?

Then take a moment to describe the days and hours of employment, whether or not there will be overtime, the salary and benefits and your basic rules. (Keep your comments short and to the point! You want to hear as much as possible from the candidate.) Also, suggests Ellen O. Tauscher, U.S. Representative from California and author of *The Childcare Source Book* (Macmillan), you should ask these questions:

1. Where do you live? (If the caregiver will be commuting daily, you want to know how feasible this will be.)
2. Are you available during the hours we need someone?
3. Is the salary satisfactory?
4. Can you outline your experience and qualifications for work with young children?
5. Are you certified in CPR, infant CPR and first aid? If not, are you willing to take a course?
6. Why did you choose to leave your most recent job?
7. Why are you interested in this job?
8. What are your long-term plans or career goals?
9. Would you agree to a nationwide investigation of your background?
10. Do you have your own car? (Assuming this is a necessity for the job.)
11. Are you currently interviewing for other positions? (If you are only at the beginning of the process and she is already weighing other offers, this will tell you how quickly you need to meet her.)

THE IN-PERSON INTERVIEW

After the phone interviews, it's time to select a few promising candidates to invite to your home for an in-depth conversation.

Arrange to meet when you have ample time to spend with the person. Notice if she is clean, well groomed and neatly dressed. Is her manner friendly and upbeat? Did she show up on time? Did she bring paperwork you may have asked to see (such as educational or training certificates, driver's license, references)?

Give her a simple employment application (you could create it on your computer) that calls for her to state her name, age, place of birth, citizenship, legal status, phone number and address, names of references and job experience. When she's finished, go over the job experience she's listed on the form. Then give her a written job description and review all the duties and responsibilities.

If, at this point, you feel she is a strong candidate, you can start asking more detailed questions about her motivations and background. Stay clear of those that can be answered yes or no - you want to elicit as much information as possible. Tauscher suggests the following:

1. What are your questions or concerns about the position, pay or hours? (You want to find out now and not two months later that she thinks the pay is inadequate or she can't stay past six p.m. on occasional evenings.)
2. Which required duties or responsibilities do you most enjoy? Which would you rather not have to do? (Once again, if doing your child's laundry is a job function, or taking a toddler to his swimming class is a responsibility, make sure she understands and agrees.)
3. Tell me a little about your family, background and education.
4. What was your motivation for becoming a caregiver?
5. Run through your idea for a typical day with my child.
6. Give me some examples of the age-appropriate activities you would do with my child on a regular basis.
7. How would you discipline my child - for example, if the older one hit the baby? Do you believe in spanking?
8. How would you handle an emergency - for example, if there was a fire in the house?
9. How would you handle a medical emergency - for example, if my child were choking?

At this point, if the person seems a likely candidate, bring your child into the room. If you have an infant, have the woman hold the baby while you continue to interview her. Watch how they respond to each other, and how sensitive the candidate is to your little one. If your child is older, ask the caregiver to tell your child a bit about herself. And suggest that your child show the person her room. This gives you a chance, says NAEYC's Barbara Willer, "to see whether the caregiver engages the child and demonstrates

responsiveness and caring."

CHECK THE RECORD

Before you offer anyone a job, you'll need to check her immigration status and references. And if you are not satisfied with the employment agency's screening, you may want to hire an appropriate firm to run another background check.

Immigration status: If your potential caregiver is not a citizen, you need to fill out Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) form I-9, indicating that you have verified her status. She in turn will have to provide you with original documents that establish her legal status, such as a green card, a passport or a naturalization certificate. As an employer you are required to keep the I-9 form for three years or for at least one year after employment is terminated. If you are interested in helping your caregiver attain legal status, check in the INS Handbook for Employers, which contains information about residence and employment eligibility requirements as well as two copies of the I-9 form. The INS number is 1-800-755-0777.

Job and personal references: Every likely candidate should provide you with three references, including her last two employers (unless she was a caregiver with one family for 10 or more years or is a recent graduate) and someone else (not a relative) who can vouch for her character. When checking references, make sure you ask each former employer specific questions relating to the candidate's job responsibilities, her interaction with the children, and any other questions that have specified relevance for you. For example, if personal tidiness is a concern of yours, ask how neatly the caregiver maintained both her personal space and common space, such as the kitchen. (See "Follow Up on References" for a list of suggested questions.)

Background check: TrustLine is the California registry of in home child care providers who have passed a background screening. All caregivers listed with TrustLine have been cleared through a fingerprint check of records at the California Department of Justice. This invaluable information can be obtained by calling 1-800-822-8490.

In addition to the agency's check, you may want to hire a firm to verify your candidate's Social Security number, employment history (although you should always talk directly to her references yourself), educational background, criminal and civil court record and DMV record, says Tauscher. You don't want to take the chance that the agency missed important information or that a seemingly benign candidate is in fact trouble waiting to happen.

To obtain this information, contact a private investigator or a company that specializes in background checks for caregivers. Tauscher's company, The ChildCare Registry,

does all the national background checks and reports back within 96 hours for a fee of \$140. Their number is 510-248-4100. Personal Profile, in Torrance, California, needs your candidate's name, birth date and employment application to do a similar report - in two days. The cost: \$150. You can contact them at 1-800-5-VERIFY (1-800-583-7439).

FOLLOW UP ON REFERENCES

When you call your potential caregiver's references, ask these questions, suggests newspaper columnists Susan Crites Price and husband Tom Price in their book, *The Working Parents Help Book* (Peterson's):

1. Over what period of time did the caregiver work for you?
2. How many children did she care for and what were their ages?
3. Why did she leave?
4. What job responsibilities did she have and how well did she meet them?
5. What activities did she plan for the children?
6. How did she handle discipline?
7. Was she reliable and prompt?
8. Was she in good health?
9. How would you characterize your relationship with her: Was it a good one or was it difficult?
10. How were you able to resolve conflicts with her?
11. What are her greatest strengths?
12. What are her weaknesses?
13. If you needed a caregiver, would you hire her again? Why or why not?

COMPLY WITH TAX LAWS

When you hire an in-home caregiver, you are legally responsible for filing local, state and federal withholding tax and paying employer's Social Security contributions.

Luckily, if you don't want to, you don't have to deal with this yourself. There are companies that will handle the appropriate local, state and federal withholdings and taxes and file the required paperwork. The most important thing when hiring a company to do this is its number of years in business and experience in handling payrolls, according to Larry Greenwood, whose firm, Global Bookkeeping in Danville, California (510-736-4859), offers such services.

You can check in the Yellow Pages for a local bookkeeping or accounting association to get the names of members and to make sure the company you're considering is a member in good standing.

ONLINE HELP

Another resource that may be of some help in your search is NaniNet on the World Wide Web at <http://www.nannynetwork.com>. This site, created and maintained by Home/Work Solutions in Sterling, Virginia, features a free, searchable database of hundreds of companies that help

families locate and retain in-home child care. There's also an online federal and state tax worksheet for domestic employers.

AFTER THE FACT - CHECK YOUR CHOICE

There's been a lot in the news lately about the controversial use of video surveillance to check up on caregivers while parents are out of the house. On TV, stories about horrifying abuses being caught on film have made this an ever more popular option. But according to Richard Heilweil, vice president of Babywatch, a company that places cameras in homes in 25 cities across the country, "Surveillance cameras don't usually uncover scenes of physical abuse. In fact," he says, "what Babywatch is designed to do is reassure parents that everything is going well."

Furthermore, since laws vary from state to state on the use of hidden cameras, Heilweil suggests that you check with your local district attorney's office to see what the law is in your area. And if you do install the equipment, you should tell your caregiver ahead of time (ideally during the interview process) so she won't feel you've acted behind her back. This will help maintain mutual trust. After you look at the tape, make sure to tell the nanny what you saw that you thought was positive as well as what you'd like her to improve.

The cost for two to three days' rental runs somewhere between \$200 and \$300. Babywatch can be reached at 1-800-558-5669.

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