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Monday, July 23rd 2007 © 2007 NY Daily News

Nanny 411: Make the right call

Relationships are always complicated, but the one between parents and a nanny can be stickier than most.

With reality shows like "Nanny 911" and "Supernanny" on TV, "Mary Poppins" on Broadway and "The Nanny Diaries" movie due out this fall, nannies have never been more in the spotlight.

In the real world, the profession is getting a push from the fact that so many parents need to work or want to work after having kids. Nannies aren't just for the well-to-do.

"This is increasingly a middle-class choice, because so many women are in families that require two incomes," said Lucy Kaylin, author of the new book, "The Perfect Stranger: The Truth About Mothers and Nannies."

"For many people, this is simply a more reasonable solution than day care," Kaylin said.

Ask around

The best way to find top-notch service, whether it's a nanny or a dentist, is word of mouth. Try co-workers. Some will be able to recommend one or, at the least, a referral service, said Pat Cascio of the International Nanny Association. If you use a service, check it out it with the Better Business Bureau. A good one will supply references, a background check and employment history.

The interviews

A couple of tips from Cascio: Have candidates name several different activities they'd suggest for your child, and ask how they feel about your parenting philosophies. A good nanny's answers will be age-specific where applicable, and will indicate a desire to follow your guidelines. Instinct will tell you when you've found the right one.

A good plan is to hire on a trial basis for the first few weeks or even months.

As a working mother myself, I know first-hand how hard it is to leave your kids in the hands of a veritable stranger. The list of qualities you want in a nanny is already a mile long, and when you add in feelings of jealousy and guilt it's hard not to succumb to all-out nitpicking.

But the truth is this: Julie Andrews is not going to show up at your door. Here's what you should keep in mind when hiring a nanny:

Set your priorities

Before you start the interview process, you have to know what you're looking for. List the duties of the job, the hours and how much you can afford to pay (the norm is \$10 to \$15 an hour). Keep in mind that their first responsibility is your child, so you don't want to distract them with other chores.

Next, take some time to jot down qualities you'd like to see in a candidate to narrow the pool. Experience, flexibility and a calm demeanor all come to mind.

Lose the guilt

It may take a bit of time to adjust, but eventually you've got to come to terms with your decision to return to work. If you let it get to you, you'll be miserable, and you'll probably make the nanny and your kids unhappy, too.

"At a certain point, you have to accept that you're not there and you've hired someone else to be there. That's when you can move forward," Kaylin said.

Don't micromanage

If you look for mistakes by your new nanny, you'll find them. As a parent, you might even make the same ones. I'm not a fan of nanny cams or other snooping devices. Instead, drop by from time to time.

If you've chosen well, you shouldn't have to leave a million lists or require a daily log of every feeding and diaper change. ---

With Arielle McGowen

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