

She's no Mary Poppins

Hiring a nanny today a lot more complicated than hoping she'll drop in on an umbrella

By Candace Murphy, STAFF WRITER © 1/15/2007 InsideBayArea.com

AH, THE FAMILY NANNY.

Just the word evokes visions of kindly, somewhat phony baloney women with pinned-up hair who sing silly songs with made-up multi-syllabic words, who levitate with umbrellas and who call the children they look after by pet names like "guvnah."

Ah, but today's nanny is no Mary Poppins.

Today's nanny, officially termed a private household worker by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is a bather, a dresser, a feeder. A supervisor of play, a washer of clothes, a preparer of bottles, a changer of diapers. An instructor of foreign language, a child education specialist, a nutritionist.

Moreover, though, today's nanny is in high demand.

There are no hard statistics as to how many nannies are employed in the United States. Estimates, extrapolated from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2004 data, suggest there are nearly 500,000 child care workers in the U.S., predominantly women, who may be employed as nannies. But hundreds of thousands more, paid under the table, undoubtedly missed that head count.

The rise in two-income families, which has left no one to look after the children at home, has obviously contributed to the boom in nanny employment. And so, too, in the Bay Area, where at least two incomes are often a necessity to make ends meet.

While the Bay Area isn't the most competitive of nanny markets — it's no New York City yet, where stories of nanny poaching gave plot twists to books like the best-seller "The Nanny Diaries" — it's certainly on the rise. CraigsList teems with listings for nannies wanted, usually with exclamation points as in "Full Time Nanny Position in Cupertino!" And nanny placement agencies, such as Stanford Park Nannies on the Peninsula, are so busy they suggest parents contact them four to eight weeks before needing a nanny at their home.



HUGS ALL AROUND: Elissa Lara, an au pair from Nicaragua for the Young family in San Ramon, plays with twins Athena and Andrew, 3, as they climb all over her. (Kathleen Turley - Staff)

"From a financial standpoint, it's competitive in the Bay Area," says Daryl Camarillo, co-owner of Stanford Park Nannies. "It's hard to find a nanny that's qualified, and legal, and all that good stuff, for under \$15 an hour. But because the nanny profession is better respected here than other parts of the country, that attracts a better nanny pool. It's not a frenzy here yet, with bidding wars, but we're at a competitive level."

But it can be intimidating for uninitiated parents to dip their toes into that nanny pool. Local parents we've talked to wonder if they need a nanny. They're unsure about the benefits and drawbacks. They wonder whether they should go through an agency or hire one privately. They question whether they should go the au pair route, or stick with a traditional nanny. They wonder what age their child should be when introduced to their first nanny, what they should ask prospective nannies and what red flags to look out for when interviewing nannies.

After speaking with experts in the field, parents who've hired nannies and nannies themselves, here are some answers.

Who needs a nanny?

"That should be, 'Who Can Afford a Nanny,'" says Pat Cascio, president of the International Nanny Association (INA). "It is a luxury."

Cascio, who runs a nanny placement agency in Houston but used to live and work in the Bay Area, says parents need to evaluate their lifestyles. If the parents have an unpredictable schedule or if their child has the tendency to pick up a lot of little illnesses — children under a



Logan Vierra, 8 months, squirms in the arms of his au pair, Monika Zubekova of Slovakia, in San Ramon. (Kathleen Turley - Staff)

nanny's care anecdotally get sick less often than those in group care — a nanny might be a good idea. Most important, though, is the family budget.

Annual child care by a qualified nanny, with a clean background check and glowing references, will set a Bay Area family back \$33,000 to \$50,000, annually — more than twice the cost of full-time group care. And if they

use a placement agency, which is essentially a head-hunting agency, another 15 percent of that salary is tacked on as a finder's fee.

"It all varies," says Camarillo, of Stanford Park Nannies. "A nanny job can be full time or part time, and a full-time nanny's hours can range from 39 to 52 hours a week. Generally, though, parents should expect to pay between \$16 and \$20 an hour for care."

Upsides and downsides

A nanny isn't just a godsend for busy parents who need to work to keep the family afloat or who simply want to continue their careers. The nanny is also an answer for parents who don't have family in the area.

Mary Freilich of Oakland, who's employed two nannies and whose 11/2-year-old daughter is in a nanny-share situation with another parent, doesn't have extended family in the Bay Area.

"I'd like to be home with my daughter, but I need the money and I enjoy my career," says Freilich. "Plus, being in a nanny share affords my daughter with the benefits of socialization. She can learn how to interact, how to share. Especially since she may not have a brother or sister."

A very real downside to the nanny situation, though, can be feelings of competitiveness or jealousy that arise between mother and nanny. Though it's not common, it does happen, and it usually stems from the guilt a mother feels for leaving her child in another's care.

Riki Juster, a nanny for two children in Oakland, says she had a tense relationship with a mother in a past working relationship in San Francisco.

"I detected that perhaps there might have been jealousy in one mom, and I started to feel uncomfortable if I came and the child would be really happy and run toward me, away from the mom," says Juster, 39. "I understand how parents might get anxious — basically when you're a full-time nanny, the baby sees you more than anyone. But it's OK. The baby knows who the parents are. It's all about personal security."

Others recommend getting a nanny that isn't a mimeographed copy of either parent.

"You want to find someone who will follow your direction, but I don't think you want to find someone just like you, because the jealousy and competition come into play," says Cascio, of the INA. "It's better if it looks

like the nanny can't be the mom, and the mom doesn't feel like she's competing with the nanny for affection."

Placement agency or online ads?

Where the nanny profession would be without the Internet is anyone's guess. To find nannies, parents interviewed for this story most often used Craigslist or parent-to-parent e-mail networks like the Berkeley Parents Network. Others used word-of-mouth. Not many used nanny placement agencies, mostly because they didn't want to pay the 15 percent head-hunter's fee.

But that head-hunting fee isn't for nothing. Part of that fee takes care of the legwork — the pre-interviews, the background checks, the reference checks. Frighteningly, almost none of the parents interviewed that hired privately did background checks. And none of the nannies we talked to who were hired privately had background checks done on them, either.

"Agencies certainly seem to do the background checks, but tend to trust word-of-mouth from other mothers," says Karoline Robbins, an East Bay mother who grew up with a nanny but has not hired one herself.

That's enough to make Camarillo of Stanford Park Nannies throw her hands up in despair. She tells the story of Jimena Barreto, the nanny that drove under the influence and killed two Danville children, Troy, 10, and his 7-year-old sister Alana Pack, as they were on an evening stroll with their mother in 2003.

A simple background and reference check would have revealed that Barreto had been fired from two other jobs, that she carried an expired insurance card dummied over to look up-to-date, that she had four convictions for driving under the influence and that her license had been suspended for a ninth time, facts that were all easily discovered after her arrest.

"Just a driving record check would have turned up her license was suspended nine times," says Camarillo. "Parents need to get the full range of background checks. There are lots of options open to families, and I know we're not the only resource. But for families that use Craigslist, I tell them, 'Run a background check.'"

To nanny or to au pair...

In simplest terms, an au pair is a nanny, just one that hails from abroad. And in the Bay Area, two not-so-small assets of the au pair are contributing to their popularity: They cost about half as much as a nanny, regardless of the number of children, and some parents like it when the au pair speaks another language.

"That's the major reason we ended up with a Spanish au pair," says Maria Young of San Ramon, whose au pair, Elissa Lara, is from Nicaragua and was placed with the family through Cultural Care Au Pair (www.culturalcare.com). "And culturally, my kids, especially my 9-year-old, will learn a lot."

Still, the au pair has some downsides. Au pairs can't stay with a family for years on end, like a nanny, because of visa issues. Also, the au pairs, at least through Cultural Care, need time off to attend school, and their English skills vary and so do their driving skills.

"It's harder than I thought it would be, because she didn't know much English at first," says Young, who keeps a computerized dictionary at hand to help with communication. "We go back and forth... but she's getting much better, and she's a lifesaver. This is our third au pair, and I have four children. Any help I can get is a huge help."

When should the nanny start?

No one — nannies, parents or childhood experts — agrees on the proper age children should be when a nanny first takes over their care. Some said introducing the nanny at birth was too soon — that a certain amount of bonding needs to take place. Others said the opposite.

The consensus, though, was that introducing a full-time nanny past the age of 2 might be a problem.

"I think it's hard for kids age 2 and over to adjust to a new, full-time person," says the INA's Cascio. "It's best to start early and grow up with the child. Stay five or six years. They become extended family."

Things to look for...

Finding a compatible nanny is about more than pristine background checks. The nanny and the parents need to see eye-to-eye, and the best way to get a feel for this is to sit down, face-to-face, and conduct a good, old-fashioned interview.

What to ask? Well, things that are important to you. Ask potential nannies their philosophy about discipline, why they do this work, whether they've ever been in an emergency situation and what they've done, what the best and worst child they've ever cared for was like, what they like to do most during the day. Give them examples and ask what they'd do if your child disobeyed them. Ask what they do when they become angry with a child. Ask if they mind light housekeeping (cleaning, laundry, cooking), if that's what you expect beyond child care. Ask what their preferred snacks are to give to kids.

And don't forget to ask to see their identification.

"There was a family a couple years ago that had a nanny apply for a job. They went online, checked her references, and she was great," says Cascio. "But they never checked her ID. It turns out she'd presented herself as someone else. And her real identity had a terrible record."

Your nanny is sans umbrella? Good

A year ago, "The New Yorker" exposed the movie "Mary Poppins" for what it really was: An anti-nanny propaganda film with the moral of "fire the nanny."

The movie, wrote Caitlin Flanagan, "advocates the kind of family life that Walt Disney had spent his career both chronicling and helping to foster on a national level: father at work, mother at home, children flourishing."

Ah, you knew Mary Poppins was a phony baloney.