

Sharing a nanny to save money gains interest

Nanny sharing has become a popular option for parents in and around Chicago
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They met through a mutual friend. Over Starbucks, brunch and other dates, they discovered they were both family-oriented, enjoyed similar hobbies and understood each other's career goals.

So after just a few months, Sarah Greenspan and Rachel Graupe, both of Buffalo Grove, agreed to take the next big step: They hired a nanny together.

"We were both nervous," said Greenspan, 36, who two years later feels grateful that she and Graupe and their husbands entered a "nanny share" arrangement for their sons. "We just really lucked out that we all kind of hit it off."

Nanny sharing, considered rare five years ago, has become a popular option for parents in the Chicago area. At Chicago Nannies Inc., a placement agency with offices in Oak Park and Lincoln Park, two of every 10 calls come from parents hoping their child can share a nanny with another child. On the Neighborhood Parenting Network online discussion board, dozens of parents post personal ads each day, hoping for a perfect match.

Sharing - which can save families about \$300 a week by splitting a nanny's typical weekly salary in half - has expectant moms exchanging phone numbers after prenatal yoga, in parenting classes and at maternity clothing stores. And employees at nanny placement agencies say they feel like modern-day cupids.

"Do you ever watch the show, 'The Millionaire Matchmaker?' I am so her," said Sarah Davis, owner of Olive You Nanny, a placement agency in Chicago. "It's really putting people together who are like each other."

Davis recently launched nannysharechicago.com, which allows users to search for compatible families by ZIP code. While parents may have been open to nanny shares in the past, the Internet has made it easier than ever to explore the option, she said.

Charissa Popp, 34, had never heard of a nanny share when she and her husband began researching child care options last year for their infant son, Cal. She wanted to go back to work in marketing and sales part time, but she struggled to find a day care that would enroll her son immediately without eating her entire paycheck.

Popp was happy to discover an online posting by Sara Traven, another woman living in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood who wanted to share a nanny three days per week. A few promising e-mails later, they decided to meet. Both mothers were nervous as they searched for each other's long brown hair and black coats at the crowded downtown coffee house.

But then - it was like destiny.

"From the moment I met her, it was like we just clicked," Popp said. "There was just something about when we met - it just felt right."

Initial attraction only goes so far, however, warns Erin Krex, president of First Class Care Inc., a domestic placement agency with offices in Chicago and Northbrook.

Without the right foundation, nanny shares can lead to messy breakups. Davis said she is currently trying to relocate a nanny who is sick of listening to each family complain about the other. Other nanny

shares have fallen apart over arguments as simple as, "Is 60 degrees too cold for the playground?"

Still other pairings end abruptly when one family moves or runs into financial trouble, leaving the other family to make new arrangements, Krex and Davis said.

To make a nanny share work, parents must have similar parenting styles and agree on important details first: all organic food or macaroni and cheese? TV time or no TV? Your house or mine?

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"It's hard enough for a family to find a nanny that they trust, but when you add an entire other family's dynamic into the mix? ð They really need to have an in-depth conversation," Krex said.

She summed up her advice in an article called "Nanny Share 101" that she now distributes to clients regularly.

Recognizing this, Emily Kornecki, 31, and her co-worker, Susan Fiesta, 31, made reservations for themselves and their husbands at a French restaurant in Lincoln Square last summer, months before their families were to begin a nanny share.

Over a three-course meal al fresco, the couples - who had known each other for almost nine years - discussed baby formula, double strollers and nanny salary.

"We'd never really sat there and talked about that kind of stuff before," Kornecki said. "Now, suddenly, we were talking about a very personal thing in our lives. It was interesting."

Despite the progress the couples made that day, they're still one match away from the perfect nanny share arrangement. One weekend this month, they interviewed six potential nannies together. Within days, their three top choices were hired by other families.

The first-time parents vow that they won't let the next keeper get away.

"We'll be smarter. ð If we find someone we like, we just have to go for it," Kornecki said.

The competition for steady work is one reason nannies are willing to take nanny share jobs. Two years ago, nanny use was down 30 percent, according to a survey by the International Nanny Association, which represents nearly 300 nanny placement agencies across the U.S.

Business has appeared to bounce back since then, in part because families are willing to hire nannies in creative ways such as nanny shares, said Susan Tokayer, co-president of the association.

And nannies - many of whom have experience working in day care settings - are often unfazed by the idea of watching more than one child at once - especially when families agree to pay an extra dollar or two per hour for the second child, experts said.

"It's totally worth it," said Sara Rozansky, 28, a nanny for two families with infant girls in Chicago.

Rozansky, who is also a certified teacher with a master's degree in early childhood education, said the nanny share is so fulfilling that she wants to open her own nanny placement agency.

"Working with two babies is like a dream come true for me," she said. "It is fantastic helping a family raise their children."

Meanwhile, parents like Lindsay Pinchuk, 31, and Sarah Bryan, 32, say it's a dream to have a nanny rotate between their homes from week to week to watch 3-month-old Jordyn and 4-month-old Will.

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Pinchuk, who owns Bump Club Chicago, a social event group for expectant moms, met Bryan at one of her company's events. When they discovered they lived blocks apart and had babies due around the same time, they agreed to a nanny share.

The first time the mothers left their babies with the nanny, they e-mailed each other from work to offer support.

"We've become friends in the process," Pinchuk said. "It was just really nice to have someone understand you."

But to Greenspan and Graupe, the mothers in Buffalo Grove, the sweetest bond of all is the one their 2-year-old sons Gabe and Zachary share after spending every day together since they were babies.

One recent weekend, Gabe's parents bought him a balloon. The toddler immediately wondered where Zachary's balloon was.

"The boys love each other like brothers," Graupe said. "The relationship, we couldn't have hoped for it to be better."