

Sitter Jitters

by Rona Gindin

Hiring a sitter got you paranoid? Here's how to find someone you can trust.

My son Josh was six weeks old, and my husband was lobbying for a night out. But we had no family in the area, and the thought of leaving Josh alone with a *stranger* had me practically in tears. "What if something happens to him? I'll never forgive myself!" I cried. Little did I know, I was echoing the sentiments of new mothers everywhere.

Most new moms are afraid to leave their newborns with a sitter, mostly because of horror stories we've all heard in the news. We're also nervous about giving up *control*! In reality, the majority of sitters are willing, loving, responsible people with whom your infant will be safe and happy.

If you go about finding a caregiver the right way, you can head back to work or just have a few luxurious hours of grown-up time whenever you need it — worry free. Here's a



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BIENVENUE!



HELLO!

SALUTE!

common sense guide to interviewing and training someone you can trust.

The first rule is to start looking early, says pediatrician Patricia Keener, M.D., founder and medical director of Indianapolis-based Safe Sitter, a national program that trains young teenagers in childcare. It's often hard to make the time to even find candidates' names and call them when you're tending a baby day and night, but you should get started as soon as possible. You can't get to know and train the person you'll be leaving your child with in only a day. The best references often come from friends, but most communities also have babysitting agencies — check the Yellow Pages for leads.

Once you've found someone who's available, use your instinct.

Two teenage sisters in my neighborhood were eager to babysit, but I just didn't feel comfortable with them. One hung out with kids who looked a little wild, the other didn't talk much, the parents seemed unfriendly...and the one time I had the girls work for me, I worried all evening.

Sometimes language can be a barrier. If you can't understand a candidate's strong accent, she may have trouble understanding you, too — and your instructions for childcare. That's especially important when there may be cultural differences to be discussed. For instance, a friend had a sitter who mixed formula at a ratio of four-to-one, instead of two-to-one as the package instructs — she was used to diluting it and giving additional bottles, as they do in some

Checklist

Include these items on the In Case of Emergency sheet you leave for a sitter:

- ✓ Your first and last name, in case she has to page you while panicked
- ✓ Where you'll be, including name of the restaurant/theater/etc., phone number and address
- ✓ Your address and phone number, in case she has to tell an ambulance where to come
- ✓ The names and phone numbers of neighbors who will be home while you're away
- ✓ The name and address of your family's hospital
- ✓ The name and phone number of your child's doctor
- ✓ The phone numbers of Poison Control, the local police and emergency services
- ✓ Specific instructions about your baby's schedule: what she eats and when, how to prepare it, how much; what time she goes to bed; etc.



parts of the world with very hot climates. Meanwhile, the baby seemed hungry all the time, and my friend couldn't figure out why!

Again, trust your gut. "Every time I talk to a mother that had a disaster, they tell me they felt wrong about it, but didn't pay attention," Dr. Keener notes. "If you have bad feelings or don't feel you can communicate with the person well, *don't* leave your baby with her."

When you think a potential sitter might work out, it's time to conduct a formal interview. Begin by making her comfortable. "Especially with teenagers, begin with simple questions. Teens are not comfortable with adults, and you don't want to come off as an adversary," Dr. Keener explains. "Ask if they have any broth-

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ers or sisters, how old their siblings are, if the teen has sat for any of them, what age child she thinks is most fun." When a sitter has her own children or has worked regularly with others, I try to get a sense of whether she lights up or boasts when talking about them; to me, that indicates caring.

Experience is important, too. Dr. Keener warns against having a young teen stay alone with an infant under six months old, and suggests that older teens staying with newborns have at least two years of practice. No matter how mature and experienced the caretaker seems, give very specific instructions. "I was even nervous about leaving Marc with my in-laws," says Orlando, Fla. mom Gale Milgrim. "I made sure they know how to feed him, burp him and change his diaper."

Once the interviewee is comfortable, talk about your expectations. "For example, explain that you don't want loud music in your house, that you don't want the baby held in front of the television, that you want her to play with the baby rather than talk on the phone — whatever your rules are," Dr. Keener suggests. You can't spell out too much: no drugs, no drinking, no smoking, no boyfriends, no yelling, no hitting. Young sitters should also be told not to fall asleep. According to Dr. Keener, even older kids sleep very deeply and will not waken if the baby cries. To be fair, don't stay out past 11 or 12.

Define your own priorities, too. When I choose caretakers, I'm more interested in logic than skill. I'd

much rather a sitter know how to call Poison Control in an emergency than change a diaper; I learned how to change one when my son was born, and I'll be happy to teach the right person the task.

Walk through first aid problems; for example, ask how the person would react if the baby choked. "She has to have the right answers for those things," Dr. Keener insists. "If she doesn't know how to relieve an obstructed airway, you can send her,

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and pay for her, to go to a course to learn that skill."

Discuss price during the interview, too, as many interviewees will be hesitant to bring that up. To make them feel more at ease, suggest, "We pay \$2.50 an hour; does that seem okay?" Dr. Keener recommends. Make sure the price is fair for your market; your child's caretaker should never feel gypped. If you still feel good about the candidate, check her references. "Convince the person you call that she has more in common with you than with the sitter," Dr. Keener suggests. "Begin by telling about your situation — that you have a little baby, that you are going to need the person for short-term sitting. Then ask if the candidate follows their rules, if the kids like her, if there's anything else you should know, and whether this parent would

recommend the sitter."

If you and the candidate are interested in the next step, have her come over once or twice while you're home. You can teach her the baby's routine, have her change a diaper, feed the baby lunch and put her to bed per your instructions. Emphasize during this time that she should never bathe the baby — for safety reasons, only parents and very experienced caretakers should do that — and that, in case of fire, the sitter should grab the child and run out of the house — no coats, no purses. At this time, you can also show her where you keep a list of emergency phone numbers and, if your phone is cordless, how to use it.

Just as you should pay babysitters enough to make them happy, try to anticipate their needs in other ways, Dr. Keener suggests. Ask what junk foods they like to snack on, for instance, and make sure there's some dinner around if you'll be leaving the house early. Have the bottles made and the jars of baby food, bib and spoon laid out in an obvious place.

Take extra steps to make the transition as easy for baby and sitter as possible. For example, don't have the new nanny give your baby her first-ever bottle; if you're going to alternate bottle and breast, make sure the baby is comfortable with bottlefeeding before the new person takes over. Be fair, too, in your expectations. Warns Dr. Keener, "Don't suddenly have your sister's kids in too or ask the sitter to do the cleaning. You have to abide by the rules just as your caretaker does."