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It's baby-sitters galore!

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BY TAMMY CHASE Staff Reporter

Attention, parents: Having trouble finding a sitter? You're not alone.

Marcy Neth, who recently decided to stay home with her 3-year-old and 9-month-old boys, hasn't been on a date with her husband since her littlest was born.

After moving from Lake View to North Center in the last year, new parents Sandy and Kevin Kinane have wanted some grownup time to grab dinner and take in a play -- but didn't know where to find a sitter in their new neighborhood.

In both families' cases, they sort of knew relatives or friends who could help out, but those were busy folks with their own jobs and kids. And like many families juggling jobs and parenthood, they can't afford nannies, whose finders' services carry a steep cost.

"Because of extracurricular overload on top of increasing homework load, many teens simply don't have the time to baby-sit -- which leave parents scrambling for alternatives on the occasional night out," said Stacy DeBroff, the Boston-based author of *The Mom Book*, *4,278 Tips for Moms!* and founder of www.momcentral.com.

What do you get?

A Web site that allows you to enter criteria: for example, that you need baby-sitting for newborns on Monday afternoons and you want the baby-sitter to have her own car. You get names, phone numbers, references and, for some sitters, feedback from other parents.

How much does it cost?

For Web subscription: \$39.99 for the first month; \$5 after that. For baby-sitting: Parents and sitters negotiate a rate.

Pluses:

Access to about 2,000 baby-sitters' names in the Chicago area, 90 percent of whom are college students. You can search by university if you're looking for someone close by.

Minuses:

Time-pressed parents -- and who isn't -- still have to do a lot of legwork, checking the references themselves and screening the sitters.

Tammy Chase

um--now what do i do?

Heidi Murkoff, co-author of the "What to Expect" series, the bible of moms everywhere, has written a book featuring the 61 questions baby-sitters ask most.

The What to Expect

Baby-Sitter's Handbook (Workman, \$12.95) is a user's guide to babies, covering topics from basic safety to consoling to how to convince a toddler to cooperate. After all, it's a brave new world out there -- and you can't assume your sitter knows how best to defrost frozen breast milk.

Also, in our more mobile society, families tend to move more and land in neighborhoods where they may not know any teenagers or child-care providers. And many parents tend to live farther from relatives who could help.

A Chicago company is attempting to change that, by making sitter hunting much like an online dating service, as *Sittercity.com* chief executive Genevieve Thiers describes her business. The Web site allows parents to seek a "match" in baby-sitters much as a single would seek a romantic partner.

"You can [type] in 'I need someone on Friday from 9 to 5, who can speak Spanish, has a car and knows CPR,'" Thiers says. "You can do that."

Thiers, who at 25 is chief executive officer of her privately held company, got the idea while a student at Boston College. The Philadelphia native, who estimates she baby-sat for about 50 families while in school, recalls seeing a pregnant mom waddling through campus and posting signs seeking a baby-sitter. That's where she got the idea that there ought to be an easier way to hook up cash-strapped college students with time-deprived parents.

After graduating from Boston College in 2000 and a stint at IBM helping business customers with software, she printed up 4,000 fliers at a local Kinko's and distributed them herself across 10 Boston area college campuses. The results of her labor: sore feet and 500 responses from students who wanted to be listed as baby-sitters on her Web site.

The three-year-old company moved to Chicago in 2002 after Thiers visited friends in Chicago and decided she wanted a change of scenery.

Sittercity.com has offices and baby-sitting services in Chicago in addition to six other major cities. In Chicago, she has about 2,000 baby-sitters -- yes, parents, you read that correctly -- who attend schools such as the University of Chicago, Loyola University and Northwestern University.

The company has also been helpful to college kids in need of spending money: Northwestern University student Paige Callahan, a vocal performance major, had trouble finding baby-sitting gigs to help pay for extras like movies and haircuts. After seeing a *Sittercity.com* flier at school about a year ago, the 20-year-old says she's "gotten some great families" and gets to earn money and still find study time once the kids are in bed.

The company has gotten an unwitting boost from the recent economic downturn: college graduates who couldn't find full-time jobs have stayed on as sitters, giving parents plenty to choose from.

"I don't think I would have known where to start," said Kinane, mother of 8-month-old Collin. "I didn't really know anyone in the neighborhood to ask."

Marcy Neth has lived in the Hermosa neighborhood for several years and sees teenagers around. But she doesn't know

their parents, nor the kids, well enough to approach them about baby-sitting. She needed someone a few hours a week to allow her to work a night a week as a librarian at the Art Institute of Chicago. And eventually someone for that date night.

Both moms posted ads on the *Sittercity.com*. Neth got about two dozen responses, and Kinane said she had at least 30. Both now have two sitters apiece they can call if needed.

Like an online dating service, it's up to the customer to do the screening. The Web site lists references for their sitters and even allows parents to enter feedback on a given baby-sitter.

"You can call and e-mail sitters, and get their references," Thiers said. It's up to the parents to do the homework, which keeps the cost of the sitter-finding service cheaper than a service that will do all of the legwork for you.

And there's even something for sitters to avoid those nightmarishly difficult parents -- the ones who underpay, demand you stay in one room and insist you know how to work the fire ladder (this reporter's experience).

"Sitters can see comments [by other sitters] about parents," Thiers said.

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