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# Caring for Older Children
# Challenges Working Parents

By Jeffrey Zaslow
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As a nanny for five families over the years, Barbara Clark knows the challenges of communicating with children.

People assume, she says, that it's toughest to talk to kids under age two because they're barely verbal. "But they communicate in so many other ways. They give you hugs. There's eye contact. They're learning to talk, and you're helping them."

Teens and preteens, on the other hand, can be stone walls. They'll say nothing. They'll snarl or pout. Ms. Clark briefly cared for two girls in their early teens. "They wouldn't let me in," she says. "Kids have a totem pole of people who are important to them. I was way at the bottom."

More working parents, aware of the dangers of having latchkey teens, are desperate to hire an adult presence for their homes. And they're increasingly turning to a group that typically watches over much younger kids -- nannies. Accustomed to changing diapers and reading bedtime stories, these nannies now suddenly find themselves policing drug use and sexual habits. This trend is helping to fuel the current nanny boom -- there are about 900 nanny agencies today, compared with 45 in 1987. But there's an open secret among the country's swelling nanny population: Few of them have any interest in looking after your teenagers.

"Ninety percent of my nannies don't want teens," says Marsha Epstein, director of American Nanny Co. in Newton, Mass. Ms. Epstein tells the nannies right at the outset that the teens don't want them around either.

Eric Phillips-Horst, now a student at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y., had six nannies during his childhood. "I had terrible screaming matches with all of them," he says. "I'd say, 'Why the hell should I listen to you? You're the nanny.' " He resented the nanny who roused him from bed and drove him to high school, chatting about her own life.

Unlike babies, who love their sitters unconditionally, teens are judgmental. Many teens today will tolerate babysitters only if they're "very, very hip," says Ms. Epstein. "If nannies are too fat or dress garishly when they pick kids up at school, the kids' friends make fun of them. Nannies have to pass the carpool test."

Despite such challenges, some nannies and teens form deep bonds. Success is rooted in the hiring process, and in the expectations of the parents, teens and nannies.

For starters, parents need an honest job description. Are you looking for a carpool driver, a homework nag, a household manager, a pal, a cop? You also want a nanny who's aware of teen culture, and whose interests -- sports, computers, music -- match your teens' interests.

Intellect is crucial, too. A baby's nanny needs to be more loving than book smart. But a teen's nanny ought to be engaging and worldly, especially if you need her to match wits with a duplicitous or mannerless Merit Scholar.

But be prepared to pay a premium. Nationally, nannies average $590 a week ($532 if they live in), according to the International Nanny Association. For college-educated nannies equipped to care for teens, expect to pay 20% to 60% more.

Some qualified nannies see it as battle pay. In Texas, a 12-year-old brandished a butcher knife at his nanny and said, "I could kill you and no one would know." His parents said he was teasing, but the nanny quit.

One nanny told me that she caught a 15-year-old boy visiting pornographic Web sites. Though she risked his ire, she made the hard decision to tell his mom. In nanny support groups, nannies discuss such "gray areas" of dealing with teens, says Sue Downey, a nanny and co-founder of the 55-member Philly Nannies. "We know Sesame Street is appropriate for a two-year-old, but is Britney Spears OK for a 12-year-old?"

Discipline is also a hot topic in these support groups; unlike a toddler, teens won't stand for a time-out, and you can't stop them from walking out the door. Nannies also share issues that upset them. Parents, worried about having overweight teens, often say they want "athletic" nannies who can be good role models. But nanny agencies concede this is code for "obese need not apply."

A sitter should be a parent's eyes and ears, but nannies complain that many parents hand over keys to the BMW "Nannymobile" and abdicate their responsibilities. Some parents even have corporate assistants select their kids' nannies**. Pat Cascio,** who runs **Morningside Nannies** in Houston, says one client with teens has been through nine nannies, and the parents didn't interview any of them.

Conscientious parents, of course, recognize the magnitude of the nanny-selection process. Bloomingdale's executive Pat Chadwick lost her husband to cancer five years ago, and has since married a widower. Between them they have four children, age 10 to 19. Ms. Chadwick sought a nanny who'd be sensitive to the blended family's history. Several declined the job, put off by the kids' ages and the tragedies they shared.

Ms. Chadwick hired Heidi Ullmann, who recognized that this was a house with four vital parents, though two existed only in pictures and family conversations. Ms. Ullmann, 25, sees herself as a big sister, available if the kids need to talk. She's careful not to position herself as a replacement for the parents who died, or for the parents working long hours.

**Pat Cascio** tells of one nanny who cared for a boy from the time he was 12. When he left for college, he penned the nanny a letter of recommendation. "She's the one I went to for everything -- my homework, my love life, my aches and pains," he wrote. "She got me through high school."