



'How Often Do You Bathe?' Questions You Shouldn't Ask a Prospective Nanny

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Tonya Sakowicz expects tough questions in job interviews. But the grilling she got from a Portland, Ore., engineer when she applied for a nanny job with his family crossed the line.

First the father asked if she was a lesbian. Next he wanted to know if she had herpes or AIDS. Then he probed her religion and insisted she promise to instruct his children in his own beliefs. Ms. Sakowicz soon fled, she says, telling him, "I'm not the right nanny for your family."

Few endeavors spark more parental anxiety than hiring a nanny. But some parents and nanny agencies are going overboard in screening, asking questions so intrusive, discriminatory and potentially illegal that they're triggering a backlash.

The issue has sparked protests in the past three months among nannies in chatrooms and blogs. The International Nanny Association, Houston, an organization of 340 nanny agencies and 200 nannies, is mounting an education campaign on the subject in its newsletter this month, says INA President Pat Cascio.

Law-enforcement agencies are taking note: New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer found evidence in an investigation that 10 New York household-employment agencies were using discriminatory questions and tactics to screen applicants based on race and ancestry; all the agencies settled the allegations, says a spokesman for Mr. Spitzer, now New York's governor-elect.

In some states, many parents may be breaking the law, too. Discrimination based on race, religion, sex or disabilities by employers of any size is illegal in six states -- New Jersey, Virginia, Maine, Colorado, South Dakota and Alaska, plus the District of Columbia, says Barbara Kate Repa, a San Francisco workplace-rights attorney and author. This would make illegal such common nanny-interview questions as, "What are your religious beliefs?" or, "Do you plan to get pregnant soon?"

Parents need to probe deeply when hiring a nanny, of course. You can't be too careful when selecting someone for "an unsupervised position with a child who can't defend" himself or herself, says Wendy Sachs, president of the Philadelphia Nanny Network agency.

But there's a right way and a wrong way to do it. Disrespectful or intrusive questions drive away good candidates. Ms. Cascio, owner of Morningside Nannies, a Houston agency, says two well-qualified nannies turned down a mother after she asked them, "How often do you bathe?" and "Do you use birth control?"

The first step in conducting a good interview is to define the requirements of the job. Consider writing an employment agreement outlining your expectations. Then, frame your questions in those terms. Instead of asking whether a nanny uses birth control, "ask if she'll be ready to arrive bright and energetic at 7 a.m. every day," Ms. Cascio says. Instead of

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Some tips for screening a nanny:

- Base questions on a job description you've already prepared
- Ask the candidate to describe how she'd handle specific crises
- Ask for war stories from previous jobs
- Require and thoroughly interview at least two references
- Conduct background and criminal checks
- If in doubt, have a nanny agency conduct an additional screening

asking whether she's planning to get pregnant, Robert King, an attorney with Legally Nanny, Irvine, Calif., recommends asking if she can foresee anything that would prevent her working in the job for at least a year.

My stepdaughter in Chicago wondered whether a nanny candidate, who was middle-aged and overweight, would be able to care well for her energetic 20-month-old son. Instead of grilling her about her age and weight, my daughter told her, "This position requires climbing stairs a lot, carrying my son and keeping up with his very fast pace. Would you feel comfortable with that?" The woman said she would; she got the job and was able to handle those requirements.

Pose examples of tough, pressured situations and ask how the candidate would respond, says Guy Maddalone, author of "How to Hire a Nanny" and CEO of GTM Household Employment Experts, Clifton Park, N.J. Ask how the nanny would handle a child who cried inconsolably for hours, bit or hit her or said "no" to everything. Ask if she can think of any reason a child should be spanked. Margaret Waters, a Belmont, Mass., mother of two, likes to ask, "Describe a day on the job that didn't go as planned, when you needed to contact the parents."

To learn about a candidate's family relationships, which can be a clue to how they will relate to children, try to establish a basis for more intimate questioning. Sharing information about yourself can help. After asking some basic questions of my first nanny, we toured my house and I told her about my own family. Then we sat down for a second round of questions about her family ties. Her responses -- that her family was loving and close -- were reassuring and accurately signaled the loving attitude she later showed toward my baby.

While a dysfunctional family background can be a red flag,

some nannies love caring for children precisely because they lacked such care in the past. The work can be a route to healing. This was true of a child-care provider I once employed, who overcame memories of childhood neglect by nurturing other people's kids. She'd had counseling to shed her emotional baggage.

With any candidate, careful questioning of references and background checks are crucial. Background checks are available online or through investigative or nanny agencies. Many nanny agencies also offer additional screening; Parents in a Pinch, Boston, does reference, background and criminal checks, plus in-depth interviewing, for \$475.