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There are keys to choosing the right nanny



NANNY SQUAD. Morningside Nannies founder Pat Cascio and staff Ingrid Hale, Kimberly McMillan and Natalie Wilhite work behind the scenes. — photo by CYNTHIA LESCALLEET
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Whether the need for a nanny is expected or sudden, finding one that fits family needs can be a daunting quest tinged with a leap of faith.

Take the search assignment seriously, says Pat Cascio, founder of Morningside Nannies and a 20-year veteran of the nanny service industry.

Nannies are not just baby sitters or housekeepers who'll watch children on the side, she says. A good nanny should have references you can check, a patient and nurturing personality and a true calling for her career path. Plus more.

Given what they do, a nanny's presence in the home is not strictly that of an employee. They've been brought into a relationship with your children and with the family. Choose carefully and a nanny can become a loving addition to the extended family, a link that can linger long after the child has grown.

"Most experienced nannies know more about children than most new moms," Cascio says, having observed both for two decades.

Granted, that can be off-putting to those who're feeling a bit guilty about heading back to work, she adds, but it should also be a comfort because that knowledge is watching over their children.

If you're seriously considering a full-time nanny, write a job description and be honest about expectations, says the International Nanny Association's brochure of basics.

Be realistic and be specific. If the hours are likely to change at the last minute, include that insight upfront. Include benefits and your overtime policy. If a car is involved, whose will be used and how will you provide gas money or mileage reimbursement? And don't forget that a nanny handling your household needs an annual paid vacation of her own, whether you take her along on one of your or not.

So how does one choose?

Even if you don't use a reputable nanny service, screen your candidates, the INA advises.

A proper background check looks at criminal activity from felonies to misdemeanors, civil proceedings and sex offender listings, driving and credit history, a social security trace and proof of work authorization.

A good nanny referral service should do the same, screening candidates by their own interview process before sending them your way and including the background check's paper trail if you request it.

INA also suggests that you trust your intuition and interview likely candidates twice. Watch the candidate with your children. Ask them "what if" questions about situations.

Cascio says other critical considerations include candidate education, health, emergency training (including swimming) and ability to communicate and fully understand what you mean.

Think about that last one, she urges. "You don't know what they don't know."

Her example: She once asked a candidate how she'd handle a temper tantrum, the applicant, hearing temper, thought temperature and responded that she'd use a thermometer.

"It worries me to see ladies with minimal education or ability to read and write follow directions on medications given to children," she says.

Cascio's tales of disasters diverted abound, such as the nanny who cleaned the baby's bottom between diapers with Lysol because she knew it was a disinfectant.

Or the nanny who was told to pick up something at the drug store but knew the baby didn't like going into the store so left the carriage at the park nearby.

Good care costs good money. Based on a 50-hour week and a two-child family, well-qualified full-time nannies in Houston can earn \$400-\$500 per week, more if they've got a degree in education, nursing or extensive experience, Cascio estimates.

"If you pay more for your car and insurance than you would for child care, you need to re-examine your priorities," she suggests.