

MINDING THE CHILDREN: Like One of the Family

Demand for nannies in American homes has sharply increased

By Heidi Knapp Rinella, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Tuesday, March 15, 2005

As it turns out, America's reality shows with nanny themes are based about as much on reality as ... well... America's reality shows with other themes.

"Would you let someone come into your home and challenge your parenting style?" asked Pat Cascio, president of the International Nanny Association and owner of Morningside Nannies in Houston.

"I can't see very many of my clients being comfortable with the person giving them that much direction," Cascio said of "Supernanny" and "Nanny 911," in which veteran nannies try to tame the households' wild beasts masquerading as children. "I think the American way of doing it is 'This is my home, I write the paycheck, you are the employee, so that puts you one or two steps below me, not on par with me or above me.'

"Which is not to say there isn't a place for a nanny in the American household. In fact, there are places for nannies in increasing numbers of American households -- currently an estimated 1 million, Cascio said.

"We know the industry is growing rapidly," she said. "More and more people are understanding what the nanny does and the role she has in the household, and the convenience there is for the family."

Carol Hale, owner of Nanny's & Granny's in Las Vegas, says that in 18 years in the business, she has seen the demand for nannies grow dramatically.

"I would say in the last probably seven or eight years, nannies have become far more popular," Hale said. "I think that we, No. 1, just have a more mobile society. People are really more likely to not live around family and friends. In our town, especially -- we've had such an influx of people. They come to town and they know no one."

Both Cascio and Hale said people who hire nannies are no longer confined to the very wealthy.

"Typically, they're young professionals," Hale said. "In our clientele we have a lot of attorneys, doctors, business people, business owners. Young professionals with a career who really don't want their children in day care. They want a little more individualized care and learning for their children. And so they hire someone to come into the home."

"If you have two children, you're probably paying as much in day care as you would to have a private employee in your home," Cascio said.

So just what role does the nanny hold in the household?

"I would like to believe that the majority of nannies of children under the age of 3 are providing 100 percent care for the children and the children's belongings, and the rooms in which the children and the nanny live in, work in, stay in and play in," Cascio said. "I would like to believe that parents do not assign household duties to child-care professionals when the children are that young."

The reason, Cascio said, is "a safety issue. I just think it's kind of a risky situation. If you were told that today, 'I would like these four tasks done -- and by the way, watch my child, too' -- you know your employer can judge if you get the tasks done, but she'll never know if her child got the attention."

And the key to a successful nanny-employer relationship is to a large part based on trust. Most families, Hale said, want a nanny who will become a part of their lives.

"That's usually the ideal situation," she said. "In fact, the most frequent request we have is they want a nanny that will stay with them."

"I've had placements last incredibly long times -- 10 or 12 years," she said.

"It comes down to a chemistry thing," said Lexy Capp, owner of Nannies and Housekeepers USA. "Does that person really want that nanny in their home, caring for their children?"

Capp remembers one client who knew immediately that a nanny candidate was right for her family.

"She knew in her heart this was the one," she said. "It's sort of the feeling of connection you get."

At the same time, a successful nanny-employer relationship often depends on both sides remembering and honoring the nature of the arrangement.

"Generally what we suggest to our families is that they renew their nanny contracts on a yearly basis," Hale said. "We do the initial contract for them in the office, then we suggest that the nannies and the families put it on their calendars 60 days before the contracts expire -- that they sit down and discuss whether or not they're going to want to continue the relationship. Are there any changes? Have there been other children? Have the hours changed? And then to negotiate a raise for the nanny."

Most nannies get raises on an annual basis, Hale said, and they can expect to be paid between \$400 and \$700 a week, depending on the situation.

"Seven hundred dollars is maybe twins or triplets, the number of children and housekeeping and extended hours -- that type of thing," she said.

Capp said the minimum her nannies earn is \$10 an hour, though pay can be as much as \$750 a week. She said she's placed some nannies for \$45,000 a year, plus benefits.

Nanny agencies generally don't employ nannies, but charge a fee for referrals and background checks. Hale charges a one-time placement fee of \$1,700. Capp offers three plans, priced according to the length of guarantee and number of replacement referrals, should they be needed. The fees range from one month of the nanny's gross salary to 12 percent of gross annual salary.

Capp's agency also has a division that she said employs several hundred nannies who work under the agency's insurance umbrella to provide child care at major Strip resorts.

The average nanny, Hale said, tends to be in one of two primary age groups, "although we do have nannies in all age ranges."

"Many of them are students that are still in school that are in their early to mid-20s," she said, "and then we see a lot of women whose children are now grown and that's what they've done their whole life -- taking care of children. And so they're coming back to the work force.

"There's a core of professional nannies that do this for a living and have maybe been through nanny training and been certified. They tend to be in their 20s and 30s. It's really not very common."

Hale said there's a shortage of nannies in Las Vegas, but she rejects most candidates.

"We generally will interview from 25 to 40 people to get like three people," she said. "Most people that walk through that door, I'd no more place with your children than I'd rise up and fly."

Those applicants, she said, come in "because somebody needs a job and they woke up that morning and they say, 'anybody can raise kids.' They can't pass the background check, they can't get the health card. We look for criminal misdemeanors as well as felony convictions." Additionally, she said, they do a credit check and a driver's license check, and nannies must know CPR.

"We make a substantial investment in anyone we choose to process," Capp said. "We turn down about 50 percent of our applicants. We have one division that all they do is background checks. We also do one-on-one interviews with placement counselors."

"A lot of people will give you their work history, and they'll conveniently slip the fact that they lived in Ohio for two years, because they had a problem in Ohio," Hale said. "But then when you do a credit check, there's all these loans for stores in Ohio. An agency that knows what they're doing will then do a criminal check in Ohio.

"That's what you're paying an agency for -- that kind of thing. We do it every day. We know what to look for. The average family doesn't."

For aspiring nannies, Hale advises, "get some experience or take a professional training program. If they come in with no experience, we put them on our sitter service so they can get some experience.

"And I would say don't do it because you need money. Do the job because you truly love kids. Being a nanny is not an easy job."