

By Anne Laufe

All About Childcare

Who's Watching Our Kids?

Childcare. It's a fact of life for families with young children. Most American mothers, whether by choice or by necessity, work outside the home at least part-time. According to the U.S. Census, in 2002 (the most recent year for which statistics are available) 55 percent of mothers with infants were in the work force. That same year, 72 percent of mothers under age 44 with older children were working for pay.

While we're out earning the bacon, who's taking care of our kids? Options range from hiring someone to watch our children in our homes to family day care and large child care centers. And even when kids get older, we want to know that they're in good hands when we're not with them.

Although child care hasn't been a priority for our nation's leaders, necessity is the mother of invention, and the choices have improved since middle class mothers began pouring into the work force 30 years ago. Read on for suggestions for each stage of your child's life.

The Early Years (2 and under)

Searching for Mary Poppins

Chances are that the ideal nanny – “practically perfect in every way” – isn't going to float into your yard carrying a black umbrella and a satchel full of magical items. But with a bit of work and a few pointers, you should be able to find a good match for your family.

Danielle Stoker, owner of A Brilliant Nanny, located in southwest Portland, says it's essential that the family and the nanny have compatible personalities, as well as similar approaches to parenting. “Some families are more structured and some are more laid back,” she says. “You want someone who will come in with her own ideas, but also someone who will go with the flow, because families already have their own rhythms, and you're not going to change that.” And while it's important for the child and

the nanny to bond, the parents also have to like and respect the nanny.

Marlynn Jayme Schotland, founder of Portland Mamas Inc., is a recent client of Stoker's. She knew she wanted someone

to come into her southwest Portland home to care for her infant three days a week while she was working and her son was in preschool, so she and a good friend decided to share a nanny.

Schotland says that she and her friend know each other well and have similar values, which made choosing a nanny surprisingly easy. She also knew what her priorities were: she needed a childcare provider who was flexible, because her hours vary, and she wanted an individual who was especially good with infants. “I wanted someone who was very patient, who was calm enough to deal with an

infant who cries and who has quirks,” Schotland says.

This is exactly what Stoker recommends to parents as they begin the search for a nanny. Clarify what you're looking for, and what your priorities are. Before you go to an agency, think about what kind of schedule you want. Do you want a full-time or a part-time nanny? How much can you afford to pay each month? Take into account the placement fee you'll have to pay the agency (around \$1000 to \$1400 in the Portland area), and also the monthly payroll taxes you'll have to pay your nanny.

When you're actually ready to interview prospective nannies, Stoker says, “you have to ask these questions that you would ask when you're hiring a new secretary, but it's also as if you're hiring a new member of the family. It's like you're hiring a new aunt.”

If you're lucky, your nanny will become like a part of the family, but both Stoker and Schotland say it's important to remember the employer/employee relationship. If that relationship is solidly in place, it's easier to address problems that may arise. “Communication is key,” Schotland says. “You need to lay all of your cards out right at the beginning so you're not sugar-coating things. You need to let your nanny know right up front your child's quirks and your household routines.”

Stoker emphasizes the importance of communication as well. “You really need to have periodic discussions with your nanny,” she tells parents. “If you can't do it daily or weekly, make sure you do it once a month.” Because parents tend to get so busy, Stoker advises her nannies to make sure those discussions actually take place.

Some moms worry that with a nanny spending so many hours with her child, the child's bond will be stronger with the nanny than with her. You needn't fret about that, according to Stoker, who says the nanny is a friend and teacher, but can never replace the relationship a parent has with the child. Schotland says both of her children are crazy about their nanny, Marisa, but she isn't bothered by it. “The more love, the better,” she says.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF SCHOTLAND FAMILY

Marlynn Schotland says that her kids – Ethan and Cate – are crazy about their nanny, Marisa Rutto.