

MINDING THE NANNY

COME LIVE WITH ME AND BE MY NEWBORN SPECIALIST. BY AMY NANCE



Bi-lingual, live-out nanny with impeccable references; reliable vehicle and excellent driving record; experienced in childcare; degree in education, child psychology or speech therapy preferable, with a working knowledge of the latest developmental research; CPR and First Aid certified; can take a leading role in: potty training, discipline, food preparation, hygiene, birthday parties, basic nursery maintenance, homework and general supervision of child's personal development; able to pick up and drop off from school and other activities and to work with family schedule (updated daily); willing to do some light cleaning and errands related to childcare or food preparation. Some vacation travel required. Some weekends and evenings required.

Sound like a tall order? It is. And yet today the nanny industry is in many cases exceeding our expectations for childcare. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent numbers, approximately 1.3 million Americans consider themselves childcare providers, with about four nannies for every 100 families with at least one child. Within that group, childcare needs vary widely—from part-time nannies who merely shuffle the kids from ballet to tennis lessons after school to full-time live-ins who administer nightly baths and goodnight kisses. This variety of needs has led to increasingly customized arrangements, to agencies who recruit nannies from universities with exceptional education programs and to the making of some very savvy nannies.

We can thank Julie Andrews for providing us with two of our most indelible nanny images: the lively if uncertain Maria from *The Sound of Music*, whose resourcefulness was set upon a room of dowdy drapes, and, of course, Mary Poppins. But there are also the governesses of Gothic fiction: Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, who arrives at Thornfield only to fall in love with her employer, Rochester, thus igniting a veritable tradition of nannies wooing their bosses (see *The Sound of Music* above, Ethan Hawke et al). If a nanny is not hopelessly alluring in her capableness and aptitude, she is oth-

erwise eerily gifted. In both Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* and Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* we get the nanny of preternatural insight, whose sensitivity and connectedness to the children or to the domicile leads her, on some level, to danger (a later incarnation, Rebecca De Mornay's nanny in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, would have us believe that the nanny herself is the danger).

Nanny lore now includes the manny, as depicted in the entirely non-threatening guise of Freddy Prinze, Jr. on *Friends*, and more recently in Alan Hollinghurst's Booker Prize-winning *The Line of Beauty*, with character Nick Guest mannying nearly everyone in the politically-powerful Fedden household. And what about the nanny of chick lit and reality programming? She's either an updated Mary Poppins called in to whip a marvelously unruly family into shape or a sweet and unassuming young girl far too good for the patrician clan she supervises.

But for all its attention in the media, nanny culture is a little-observed, tightly-run and rather insulated little subculture with its roots in the household dogma of the Victorian era. For the families that choose to negotiate it, taking a closer look at the process of getting and keeping a nanny pays off.

While brick-and-mortar nanny agencies exist and offer families the chance to work directly with the person who screens the candidates, several online companies streamline the process. Some agencies have their own orientation programs and hold nanny "speed-dating" events for their clients, while others are so careful in their pairings that they screen potential employers too.

EMPLOYMENT APPLICATION

At the helm of many of these agencies sits a woman who was once a nanny. She reigns like a doyenne over the business of matching clients with caregivers, intimately familiar with a courtship-like process that requires everyone involved to submit to examination. Casey Smith, owner of Loving Arms LLC in Sarasota, says that the screening procedure for prospective nannies is rigorous. In addition to an eight-page application, candidates meet with Smith, who uses the time to pose open-ended questions. "I ask them, 'What do you do on a rainy day?'" If they don't come up with a good answer to those kinds of questions, I don't use them. I have to have some sort of rapport with them too," she explains. Smith will often have her kids at the interviews, to observe the candidates with them.



Families are not exempt from the application process either—filling out their own and meeting with Smith. "Then we send extensive bios on the nannies. The family interviews, makes a choice, fills out the paperwork and signs an agreement," Smith says. Both parties are covered by a 90-day guarantee. If either is not satisfied, the family can choose a second nanny or interview new candidates at no charge.

Satisfaction is an important consideration on both sides. "I've become picky in deciding who I work for," says Ashley Haber, a junior at the University of South Florida who has seven years of caregiving experience. "I really want parents to be involved with the kids and to be interested in who I am." Haber's discerning approach is something the International Nanny Association encourages, advising agencies to "highly regard" a nanny's preferences and encouraging them to give nannies information on the employers who express an interest in them.

What can one expect a typical nanny profile to look like? Some have gone to nanny schools. Others are career nannies who specialize in managing households—and for whom confidentiality agreements are par for the course (an INA survey indicates that 22 percent attend professional conferences). But while it is possible to hire a nanny whose concentration is home-schooling or multiples, most simply come with years of experience and a relevant degree background.

Haber suggests interviewing candidates in a public place, and the INA makes the same recommendation. Come prepared with questions (sample sheets are available at www.nanny.com) that cover the nanny's background, qualifications and requirements. It is acceptable to ask an applicant if she has an illness or other condition that would prevent her from performing certain tasks. Many ask a candidate directly if she plans to remain in her current situation or if she anticipates a change in her availability. A question like "Where do you see yourself in x number of years?" is a delicate way to approach this.

But perhaps the most crucial aspect of the interview is the references it will elicit from the applicant. "I can tell you anything I want, but when you ask a reference, that's another parent who is going to tell you the honest, blunt truth," says Haber. An agency will have already pursued every reference

for you, but most parents want to speak with them personally. How many references to expect? Up to a dozen. Keep the conversation to a minimum and listen carefully to what the references say. Compare notes with the responses you received from the nanny and a broader picture will emerge. Don't undervalue the impression you get of the nanny while in talks with her—hiring the right person hinges on both the data collected in a strong application and on your sense of the candidate as someone who can connect well with children. "You want someone with a sunny personality," advises Smith. Sarah O'Shea, a nanny with a master's degree in therapy, sums up the paradox that lies at the heart of the search process. "You're looking for someone who treats the job professionally but doesn't look at the child as a job," she says.

Both parties sign a contract that stipulates the details of the arrangement. Agreements are typically broken up into subcategories: family schedule, discipline, compen-



sation, taxes and domestic tasks, for instance. Contracts include contingencies for pay review, which is generally offered yearly, and how overtime will be handled, with holiday hours usually paid double. Full-time nannies can expect a vacation (the industry standard is two weeks paid). A 2006 INA salary survey of 1,119 nannies put the average salary for a full-time, live-in nanny in the South Atlantic region at \$650 a week, with live-outs making approximately \$600. Compensation depends on a variety of factors, including the nanny's experience and the number of children. Since filing the nanny tax is a labyrinthine process, many families hire a firm that specializes.

Once hired, it can take some time for a nanny to transition, says Bradlee Roffers, who took three months in her search to find the right au pair—a caregiver from another country who lives with the family as a cultural exchange. The Roffers hosted an au pair from Brazil for whom English was still

a challenge. "I think it's hard to find a perfect scenario," Roffers says. "You have to be patient. It takes about four months for a person to become acclimated to simple things like driving, how to operate the thermostat." On the other hand, Roffers says that hiring an au pair over a nanny is extremely cost effective and that the hours are more flexible. "But you can't expect this person to come out of their room only to take care of the kids and then return to it. Ours was an extension of the family, included in meals and activities," Roffers says.

Experienced moms and nannies are pragmatic about the often complex connection between them. "Everyone comes to the relationship on both sides with some baggage," Roffers says. Haber's placements have led to meaningful connections with the families. "One mom I sat for would call me to come over, sit me down and blurt out a mess of things and really talk to me. I love to be able to have that relationship," she says. O'Shea

remembers a job where it was clear that the mother resented the time O'Shea got to spend with the baby. "I was surprised at how close I got to the kids," she says. "But sometimes it is a competition, especially if the mom is there while you're working. The same skills that make a good parent make a good nanny, but you have to remember that you are not the parent."

There is a transition period for the parents involved as well, but it can be negotiated by rethinking expectations. "I had this belief that because I'm paying the au pair they should do things that I wouldn't do. I wouldn't unload the dishes at 8am, so I can't expect the au pair to do it at 8am. I don't expect the person to replace me as a mom. If the kids have fun, everyone's safe, the mess can be cleaned up, why can't I come in, watch a few minutes of Oprah with the au pair and offer her a glass of wine?" says Roffers. Now that's a cheery disposition. 

