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A night out, but who can watch the kids?

For parents of young children, the right baby sitter can mean the difference between going out on the town and staying in watching "CSI" on Saturday night.

Still, many parents linger in domestic captivity because they believe finding someone to watch Junior these days is even more challenging than securing a last-minute reservation at Capital Grille.

Not necessarily - especially if you live in Boston, said Stacy Sao, managing director of BostonCentral.com, an online community for local parents and kids.

"The Greater Boston area has its own unique nuances. In the city, there's a greater accessibility to college students because of the large student population. In the suburbs, there are various resources at the town levels," said Sao.

Many parents are not aware that most colleges and universities - as well as some high schools - have employment offices that can help match students to odd-jobs like baby-sitting, she said. In addition to these job boards, Sao suggests taking advantage of local boards like Craigslist where you can post ads or search listings for college students who are looking for baby-sitting gigs.

"I'm a big fan of college students, especially if you need a daytime sitter," said Susan Scully Petroni, Bay State Parent magazine editor. "Try to find a sitter who is an education or early childhood major and look for schools that specifically have early childhood programs, like Boston College and Wheelock College."

Petroni also said she has a lot of mom friends who swear by websites like Sitter city.com and Boston-based TheSitterloop .com. For a fee, these companies will link parents with available baby sitters within a 10-mile radius and match specific criteria like knowledge of first aid or CPR.

Moreover, all of the baby sitters registered on these sites are over 17 years old - something parents today prefer over younger teens.

"College-aged and twentysomething sitters tend to be more mature, they can drive, and can keep their head in an emergency," said Genevieve Theirs, founder of Sittercity.com.

A Boston College alum, Theirs got the idea for Sittercity when she saw a very pregnant woman on campus with "baby sitter wanted" fliers. She realized how much the world had changed from the days when little Suzy from down the road would baby-sit for all the families in the neighborhood.

"There is no longer a village to help raise our children," said Pat Cascio, president of the International Nanny Association.

People today move around for their jobs and don't have the social network in their neighborhoods any more. Also, younger kids tend to be booked up in extracurricular activities and don't have time for baby-sitting, she said.

In their quest for the perfect baby sitter, some parents turn to day-care centers and summer camps - places that generally have young people with experience and training with young children.

The Loring family of Revere scooped up their baby sitter, Abigail Shaughnessy, from the Revere Youth Center. Shaughnessy, an 18-year-old Boston College student, also serves as the Loring children's camp counselor.

"We'd always relied on family members for baby-sitting, but there were always times when we'd have plans with these family members and be left without a sitter," said Cindy Loring, who has three children, ages 8 months and 3 and 4 years.

In Shaughnessy, the Lorings have a sitter who is not only mature and familiar, but also one who doesn't just plunk the kids in front of a DVD. "She's young and energetic; they cook together and do arts and crafts. It's like an extension of the youth center," said Loring.

SIDEBAR:

The details

Sitters in a pinch. Professional baby-sitting agencies like Parents in a Pinch in Brookline or Nanny Poppins Inc. in Woburn provide services ranging from live-in nannies to short-term baby sitters and will even provide backup sitters at a moment's notice. Most agencies require registration and placement fees in addition to the sitter's hourly pay.

Word of mouth. Ask friends, family members, neighbors, and co-workers about dependable baby sitters. Of course, some people may be unwilling to share their finds.

New in town? If you are new to an area, local Newcomers Clubs, newcomersclub.com, often sponsor baby-sitting co-ops and provide information on local childcare resources. You can also browse baby-sitting resources and connect with other parents by joining a local family network such as FamilyZip.com.

Grade a sitter. Call your local recreation department. Many towns offer baby-sitting classes for local teens and some even keep lists of teens that have passed the class.

Ask the doc. Browse the bulletin board or ask the nurses at your pediatrician's office for a list of local, recommended baby sitters.

SOURCES: Bay State Parent magazine, BostonCentral.com, International Nanny Association, Sittercity.com