

HUDSON RIVER PARK'S HALLOWEEN KIDZKARNIVAL SUN, OCT 26 NOON - 5PM

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What

Things to do or see in New York Kids

When

All dates



Where

All areas



How to find baby care in NYC

Creative child-care options...besides quitting your job and staying home.

By Carole Braden

Wed Dec 16 2009

For Liz and John Cichon, it was the Child-Care Crisis of 2009.

In September, John, an often-at-home freelance art installer who rotates among the city's museums, snagged back-to-back gigs hanging shows at the [Museum of Arts and Design](#) and the [Guggenheim](#). That week, Liz, an out-of-work high-school social studies teacher who had signed on with a temp agency, got a long-term assignment at a bank. It was a Friday, and both began work the following week. The couple's then ten-month-old son, Dylan—who'd so far had Mom or Dad home with him most every day of his life—wasn't going to be warmly welcomed by either parent's soon-to-be employer.

"At home, I have a large family I could have called on for help," says Liz, who grew up outside of Chicago. Here, where the couple had been living for less than three years, emergency child care would be more elusive (like we need to tell you that). Unless you're among the blessed few who have a sprightly but bored Nana or Opa living in a nearby neighborhood, or you gave birth to a droid baby with an OFF switch, you are probably hyperventilating in empathy for the Cichons. As New York City challenges go, securing affordable, reliable child care is perhaps second only to scoring a cheap two-bedroom apartment with laundry, a bathtub and room in the hallway for a stroller. It doesn't walk up and hug you. In fact, for most new parents from the Bronx to deep Brooklyn, it involves a stressful, pricey scramble.

"That first decision about who is going to care for your baby is also the most excruciating," says Betty Holcomb, policy director for [Child Care Inc.](#), one of five agencies in New York's [Child Care Resource and Referral Consortium](#). "It costs too much, there aren't enough options, and the quality is all over the place. It's almost random, I think, for parents in terms of whether or not they're going to hit the jackpot."

The Cichons did. But not without first throwing a bunch of quarters in the slot machine. It was their creative thinking and willingness to pound the child-care pavement, plus a timely intervention by Lady Luck, that led them to the big win (as with the search for the perfect apartment, this game is often about being in the right place at the right time).

Liz was aware that day care wouldn't be an option, since she and John hadn't yet had Dylan vaccinated. A babysitting agency would gobble up all of Liz's earnings, making that option pointless. She and John also knew that with their erratic work schedules, "What to do with Dylan next week" could be a recurring conundrum. So they came up with an idea: They aimed to find a flexible part-time nanny who would agree to babysit—and receive pay—only when they needed her. That goal seemed unlikely, but it helped broaden their thinking. Liz next put a plea on [shareournanny.com](#), a blog for NYC families looking to split the cost of double-duty nannies (see below)—and lucked out when another mother in Washington Heights, the Cichons' neighborhood, quickly responded. The family was willing to let Liz and John kick in on their nanny's compensation on weeks when the schedule made child care a necessity for them. The morning her job started, Liz deposited Dylan at the other family's apartment with their young nanny. "She was wonderful," Liz says, "but she didn't have the experience to handle two kids at once. Dylan sensed her insecurity. He cried all day long." So did Liz, who soon grew upset enough to take a day off work. After a phone exchange replete with sobbing, her father hopped a fast plane to New York. He stayed for a week as his grandbaby's Manny Poppins—and offered to hunker down for a month.

Liz had intended to continue the nanny-share search, but before she did, a friend's reply to a frantic Facebook post she'd written about her child-care dilemma led to another solution. "You could always reach out to my mom," the comment read. "She's retired now and looking for some work." The friend's mother, a former health-care worker who loves babies, soon signed on for active duty. Dylan's babysitter, Eleanor, is flexible—happy to work full days for a month when jobs come around for John, then take three weeks' unpaid leave—and affordable: The Cichons pay a shockingly reasonable \$80 for a full day of loving care.

This is the Ideal Situation every New York City parent hopes to fall into—but rarely does. According to 2008 data (which does not reflect private, and often off-the-books, relationships between families and nannies), there is a single licensed child-care slot in the metropolis for every five babies that need one; the waiting lists for city and state subsidies are 40,000 families long; and infant care per household has in recent years averaged upward of \$19,000 annually.

During the wild economic ride that was 2009, the city's child-care services really took it on the chin. Budget cuts and policy changes at day-care centers run by the [Administration for Children's Services](#) displaced some 3,000 five-year-olds from low-income families in September; kids were moved from classrooms in subsidized centers to public-school kindergartens,



which usually don't provide after-school care—and working parents had to sprint to secure new plans. No one was safe: not even the members of the New York Police Department. The Graham Windham Finest Child Care Center, a discount day-care facility at One Police Plaza for children of force-employed parents, closed suddenly last September, leaving 30 moms and dads with nowhere to drop their youngsters as they dashed to work in the mornings.

But, as is often the case, good things were also born of the tough times. Hard-hit government-subsidized child care stands to see some relief, as President Obama has increased funding to [Head Start](#) and [Early Head Start](#) programs nationwide (although he has cut monies for [Even Start](#), which promotes family literacy). “On a federal policy level, there is a lot of excitement around early care and education, with funds to fuel it,” says Ursulina Ramirez, senior policy analyst at the NYC-based nonprofit [Committee for Hispanic Children and Families](#), citing the [Race to the Top Fund](#) and the [Early Learning Challenge Fund](#) as the ones to watch in coming years.

At home in New York City, parents pinned in the child-care crunch are being more proactive, innovative and open-minded than ever before when it comes to seeking that haven of dependable, affordable, quality care. Families who once employed full-time nannies are considering shared or nontraditional caretakers, or sometimes less-expensive early education and day-care programs; everyone is casting a wider net and keeping an ear to the ground—a Twister-like pose parents are all too familiar with. Or they're swapping diapering sessions with one another. That's right: Babysitting co-ops, long more of a Midwestern phenomenon than a Manhattan one, are on the rise citywide. The groups, formed in tight communities or large apartment buildings, allow parents to babysit for other people's tykes, earning points that they can later trade in when they need a “sit” of their own.

“In a babysitting co-op—as in most things in life—you have to give to get,” says Amy Suardi, a stay-at-home mother of three, blogger of [frugal-mama.com](#) and the founder of the Play Area Association babysitting co-op, which formed in 2008. The 21-family group is based at Payson House, an Upper East Side building in which hospitals including New York--Presbyterian, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and Rockefeller University provide subsidized housing for medical residents (Suardi's husband is a child psychiatry fellow at New York--Presbyterian). Centered in the building's indoor/outdoor play areas, the co-op uses the website [BabysitterExchange.com](#) to manage requests and offers to sit, as well as the points parents earn and spend. Suardi says that the group, whose monthly playdates and parties have boosted membership, has proved to be a real success, with parents joining in “You watch my kids, I'll watch yours (for free!)” solidarity. Hey, a night out for dinner and a movie isn't so cheap these days. “It's great,” Suardi says, “because you're not paying for babysitting on top of the cost of your date.” Good child care? Nonnegotiable. Gratis, good child care? Now that's priceless.

Niche Placement

In charge

Samantha Fillian, 29

The Backstory

[Niche](#), started by Fillian in 2007, finds highly trained nannies suited to children with special needs, as well as to typically developing kids whose parents seek an “exceptional” caregiver—and can afford to pay for the privilege of hiring one. Fillian found her calling after earning a master's in education from the New School and then taking a job caring for a three-year-old deaf girl. “I read everything I could about deafness,” she says. “But I learned that it wasn't knowledge I needed—it was understanding and patience.” After six years on the playroom floor, Fillian began recruiting similarly saintly nannies and matching them with families whose children face challenges including autism, Down syndrome, sensory disorders, juvenile diabetes and ADD/ADHD. (She still, by the way, babysits for her now nearly nine-year-old original charge on weekends.)

How it works

“We don't shuffle through a pile of rsums,” says Fillian, who conducts a custom search after meeting parents and children to discuss their needs, concerns and caregiver experiences. Prospective nannies fill out a lengthy questionnaire and provide six references, all of which get a call from the agency; the hiring family gets to see the uncensored notes. Once a nanny is signed, the agency runs a nationwide criminal background check. Fillian also advocates for caregivers in this equation, suggesting they draw up employment contractsthat include detailed job descriptions (“I will do the children's laundry. I will not do the family's grocery shopping”). “A nanny needs to maintain a certain quality of life and to work in an environment where people respect and value her,” Fillian adds.

The guarantee

No go? Within nine months, Niche will replace your nanny, at no charge.

What it will cost you

Nannies earn \$20 to \$25 per hour. Fillian's commission is equal to seven weeks' pay (at least \$5,600 for a nanny working 40-hour weeks); she charges a flat fee of \$3,200 for a part-time placement.

Where to find more info

[nicheplacement.com](#)

Share Our Nanny

In charge

Sharon Meiri Fox, 31

The Backstory

Meiri Fox founded her company in late 2008, after she emerged from the frenzy of finding care for her now 18-month-old son, Nate. The [shareournanny.com](#) “blog” isn't so much a daily feed as it is free classifieds for parents who want to employ a nanny but suffer sticker shock over the cost. One possibility: Hire half a nanny by finding a compatible family needing child care and coupling up, says Meiri Fox, who works as a fund-raiser for Columbia University. Her site serves as a meeting place for parents seeking similar situations. “You can share your nanny anyway you want,” she says; posts have run seeking shares for “one nanny, two kids” and for “half-and-half schedule” arrangements.

How it works

Parents in search of shares fill out a form detailing everything from their child's age to household rules (no TV?) and eating habits. Meiri Fox receives the info via e-mail and posts it to the board. Spot someone who might make a match with you? Give 'em a call. Some sharers come with a nanny in tow; others team up and conduct a search. (Experience caring for more than one kid—even twins—is a must for a shared nanny, plus great organizational and communication skills.) Meiri Fox says she posts up to three share opportunities weekly, and that [shareournanny.com](#) has posted more than 100 listings since the site's inception. In addition, she counsels parents personally on the perils and perks of employing a two-family nanny, and creates content for her site on the whats and hows of sharing.

The guarantee

None. Meiri Fox says, however, that all involved tend to work hard to make shares succeed. “When you have a great nanny and see your child thriving,” she says, “you want it to work.” (Hint: Negotiating a three-party contract helps!)

What it will cost you

Zilch. Meiri Fox posts (and reposts) nanny-share pleas for free. You will, of course, need to pay your nanny for her time—or the half she spends caring for your kid.

Where to find more info

shareournanny.com

Diki Daycare’s Tibetan Nanny Referral Service

In charge

Tsering Diki, 30

The Backstory

Tibetan by birth, Diki opened her day-care center in Astoria, Queens, five years ago for her Tibetan neighbors, but welcomed all families. “Tibetan people practice Buddhism; that makes them very calm,” she says. “We try our best to be compassionate, especially with small children.” Soon, word of the quality of the child care she offered made Diki’s a much uttered name among families looking to hire Tibetan nannies. “[Parents] found my website, called and asked me if I had anybody I could refer to them,” she recalls. Her recruits were so well received that she began a formal referral service in 2006. Since then, she’s matched nannies with more than 120 families. Those relationships, she says, are “not all perfect,” but have mostly proven to satisfy everybody involved.

How it works

Word of mouth leads Tibetan women looking to work as nannies to Diki’s office, where they fill out applications and participate in interviews. A family on a nanny search likewise completes a questionnaire, in which they detail the abilities and flexibilities they desire in a nanny. The service runs checks through New York’s statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment and the New York City Department of Investigations on all candidates before making a referral. Diki says her staff screens for proficient language skills and encourages candidates to enroll in courses in first aid, CPR and early childhood development. Not only a matchmaker, the center helps negotiate salary and other details before a nanny signs on with a family.

The guarantee

A new referral within a year is free if yours doesn’t work out.

What it will cost you

In addition to the nanny’s salary—which Diki says is commensurate with experience and ranges from \$12 to \$25 per hour—the center charges a one-time fee of \$300. The payment, which helps fund cultural programming and summer day camp for Tibetan kids in NYC, can be written off as a charitable donation.

Where to find more info

dikidaycare.com

Hey Day Nannies

In charge

Annabelle Corke, 32, and Deb Crisford, 32

The Backstory

“We’re like personal shoppers for parents,” says Crisford—and clearly ones with keen eyes, given that she and her partner, Corke, have plucked nannies for nearly 200 NYC families in their three years in business. Their signature: the “big-sister nanny”—usually an American woman, age 25–35, educated, traveled and fit. (“People also come to us a lot looking for mannies,” says Crisford, who explains that finding male caregivers can be a challenge for recruiters who don’t have experience vetting them.) The typical Heyday nanny is young at heart, willing to play and be a friend as much as a lunch maker and a tantrum stopper; she is also generally attuned to the importance of an occasional date night for Mom and Dad. She can be full-time, part-time, short-term or live-in, and tends to have a creative bent, says Crisford, who has sought former ballet teachers, piano players and vegetarian chefs for arty families.

How it works

The process begins with an in-home introduction. “If you don’t meet a family, how do you get a sense of who they’ll want in their home?” asks Crisford, who says she and Corke sit down with new clients to discuss their dream nanny, including ethics and morals. Heyday puts the word out and interviews up to 30 candidates before sending the family their top two picks. The pair hits pay dirt 98 percent of the time, according to company stats.

The guarantee

Heyday nannies come with a two-month warranty (a replacement for any reason in the first 60 days) and a one-year commitment. “Having the right person for a year is much more productive than having the wrong person for many years,” says Crisford, who admits that young nannies can be lost to grad school, marriage or the desire to write the Great American Novel.

What it will cost you

A \$200 registration/consultation fee, followed by a placement charge of up to \$3,200. Nannies are paid an hourly rate of \$15 to \$20.

Where to find more info

heydaynannies.com

Sensible Sitters

In charge

Vanessa Wauchope, 27

The Backstory

This six-year-old service is the jet-setting family’s Babysitter Central, offering short-stint child care in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Hamptons and Palm Beach (CA), plus a roster of fast-packing kid wranglers available to travel internationally. “City families have different needs than the average Americans,” says Wauchope, who studied business in college and started the company after working for years as an in-demand, well-traveled babysitter. Wauchope felt that NYC’s legions of college students were an untapped child-care resource: “I started recruiting at NYU,” she says. “Now we hire students and recent grads from all over the city, many of them from schools with education programs.” Wauchope sees young, vibrant occasional sitters as a great supplement to a full-time nanny, and the only cost-effective answer for self-employed parents with crazy schedules. “The mom-trepreneur has really changed child care,” says Wauchope, who has many clients that work from

home or from the sidewalk via BlackBerry, and want to fill the gaps with short-notice child care. “Our network of sitters can cover all their bases.”

How it works

The Sensible Sitters goal is to create a web of kid-watchers in different locations for each family. Sign up with one office and have a sitter in a snap (for three hours minimum) in any area the company covers. The service needs only one day’s notice to fill a slot, and attempts to man the job with a sitter from a short list of the family’s favorites. Wauchope has also organized a group-outings program for school-age children, called Sensible City, which offers educational field trips to museums and run-around time in Central Park.

The guarantee

A sitter, and often one you’ve met before, at 24 hours’ notice.

What it will cost you

A one-time \$151 registration fee, plus hourly rates starting at \$20. Wauchope offers credit card billing for parents who prefer not to dole out cash at the end of the night (tips and cab fare not included).

Where to find more info

sensiblesitters.com

Smart Start Sitters

In charge

Melody Rubie, 49

The Backstory

“We’re all about education,” says Rubie, who started her service in April 2008 for parents to whom developmental learning is a priority from Day One. Rubie has a roster of 40 sitters, many of whom have a background in childhood development; the rest are creative types (musicians, visual artists) with an interest in early childhood education. Smart Start sitters can, of course, make Fluffernutters (or, if you wish, organic almond butter and 100% fruit spread on gluten-free bread sandwiches). But their focus will be on feeding Kiddo’s mind, through educational play and “positive care,” a technique in which caregivers show children how to channel their emotions productively. The service offers full-time and occasional sitting, and tries to meet any need in between.

How it works

Smart Start sitters must pass a tough vetting process in order to be signed by the service. “We analyze their responses to actual scenarios that they might encounter with kids,” says Rubie. When a caregiver is dispatched to meet a family, the questioning continues: “We encourage clients to interview a sitter before leaving their child with her,” Rubie explains. Parents may spend up to an hour getting to know a candidate, and Rubie suggests they find a few that they put into rotation. “Every person brings something new,” she says.

The guarantee

Parents receive this promise: You will never be asked to leave your child with a stranger. “Even if the call is for an emergency sitter,” explains Rubie, “we send her 30 minutes early so parents can sit down and chat with her.”

What it will cost you

An annual membership costs \$2,000, while a monthly pass will set you back \$200. No-commitment options include the Try Me package: A \$51 fee makes you eligible for three sits (up to five hours each) in one month. Members pay sitters \$15 to \$25 an hour and get one hour of free sitting after every 51 paid hours.

Where to find more info

smartstartsitters.com

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