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By Jacoba Urist

When Good Parents Leave Their Baby Home Alone

At a holiday party last week, a couple started telling us a "funny" parenting story. They were staying in Paris, in a fourth floor walk-up, and decided to leave their 1-year-old asleep in his Pack 'n Play, and scamper down for a drink or two at a place nearby. No need for a babysitter -- they'd just plug in the ol' baby monitor and keep the handset with them at the bar. Punch line: they fried the thing in the foreign outlet.

Needless to say, I didn't get the joke. My maternal mind went into overdrive: smoke detectors and carbon monoxide alarms beeping, little [Madeleine McCann](#) crying out for help, her parents sharing a dessert at the hotel restaurant (I don't know for a fact that they ordered dessert, it's just what I picture). And you can't really blame me. I'm a lawyer. We're trained to think in terms of "duty of care," "assumption of risk" and the "reasonable person standard."

But when I expressed my shock at the notion of baby monitors as babysitters, the father in question defended the practice. "You know, there *are* different parenting styles," he informed me.

Well, that's true. There certainly are many valid ways to parent -- part of what makes it so maddening in my opinion. I prefer clear lines, and the job generally leaves room for interpretation. But luckily, that's not the case here. While state law varies on what age an older child must reach before he or she can stay home, it never allows a parent to intentionally leave a sleeping baby or toddler unattended while he or she goes off to enjoy a recreational activity away from home; and there's no technology exception.

It turns out though, parents are often afraid to say something to a friend or relative who engages in electronic "babysitting"-- even when they know a child is at risk. One couple I interviewed finally asked neighbors to leave their dinner party when they learned that the parents had simply left one of their phones by the nursery door. It was the third time the couple had disclosed to them that they were using the "iPhone babysitter" in their presence, and the hosts had enough.

And pediatricians across the country have deep concerns about substituting technology for human supervision -- especially between Thanksgiving and New Year's when people travel more, consume more alcohol and have more trouble finding available sitters. I

spoke with Dr. Robert Sege, professor at the Boston University School of Medicine, spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics and a member of their Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, who reminds people "part of the responsibility of parents is to have an adult near their young children at all times."

Here are four tips to help parents do just that this holiday season.

1. Use technology wisely

While they can't watch your kid, phones do have enormous parenting advantages. Technology education specialist and founder of [TechSavvyMama](#), Leticia Barr, told me she tells parents that, these days, there are all kinds of apps to help you connect quickly to people you trust within your social network. Like RedRover for instance: download it to your phone, and then instantly message or text your entire mom club or neighborhood when you need a safe, reliable babysitter.

2. Plan ahead for trips and vacations

With so many families traveling this time of year, try to plan for your childcare needs *before* you reach your destination. Call the hotel where you'll be staying or check-in with the people you're visiting. Often, you can reach out to local babysitters through online sites like [SitterCity](#) and check references with a few thorough phone calls. But remember: even if the resort vouches for the sitter, you should still do your own due diligence before anyone stays with your child.

3. Think outside the box

Babysitters are in shorter supply this month, so consider some responsible, alternative strategies. For example, one couple I spoke with splits hours with neighbors in their building. The father stays with their daughter while the mother goes to the nearby apartment to sit with their friends' children; then the couples swap the following weekend and the other one sends someone down the hall to babysit.

4. Rock the boat

Nobody likes to pass judgment on someone else's parenting decisions. Some parents allow more screen time or put their kid all over YouTube. That stuff is up for grabs. But leaving a young child alone for an extended period of time isn't -- even when a device theoretically allows you to see or hear what's going on inside the bedroom. If you know that parents are engaging in this dangerous practice, it's always better to stick your neck out and say something. A good friend and parent will thank you one day.