

Wednesday, January 26, 2011

By Neferteri Strickland

Screen potential child-care providers carefully

I buy my milk at Kroger because it's usually cheaper than Walmart. I check online at Gasbuddy.com for the least expensive gallon of gas before I fill up, and I only buy clothes on sale.

I, like everyone else, have had to re-evaluate my earnings in relation to my expenditures. In laymen's terms, I now have to watch what I spend.

Recession or not, quality child care isn't a luxury, but a necessity. But should we pinch pennies when it comes to child care?

As an au pair specialist, families who are considering an in-home au pair to cook, clean and care for their children should enlist the services of a reputable child care screening agency.

Needless to say, the reactions to having a full-time, live-in au pair are mixed. Some consider it but find using an agency outside their budget, while others who can afford to wouldn't dream of having someone live with them, reliable child care or not. Others do their research and find that hosting an au pair really can enhance quality of life.

Full-time employment among families with children younger than age 6 and among families with school-age children ages 6 to 12 has declined since 2008. While full-time employment is lower, part-time employment has increased.

Care during nontraditional hours, part-time care and temporary care are all difficult to find and consequently tend to be more expensive. The high cost of child care forces parents to make difficult decisions. Parents want high-quality child care for their children. Unfortunately, safety, health and school readiness comes at a cost that many parents cannot afford.

The next time you're online, scan the child care listing on Craigslist. You may or may not be surprised to find:

-- PJ Party: While you enjoy a night out on the town, your child, dressed and ready for bed, will spend the night in a total strangers home.

-- Home or Hotel: A sitter lists themselves as a single parent who will come to your home or hotel and watch your child(ren) while you attend a wedding or company function.

-- Need Child Care: Parent looking for child care in their home for an 18-month-old. 8-3 M-F \$70-\$90 per week.

-- Recently Single Mother Needs Help: 25-year-old recently divorced single mother needs a sitter M: 11am-6pm T: 8am-2pm W: 11am-6pm TH : 8am-2pm F: 11am-12pm.

I'm sure you read these actual postings and see that these families are in need of assistance. They are reaching out to their community for help, but at the same time, they are creating an opportunity for predators to take advantage of their family.

Please advise anyone you know to carefully screen child care providers, perform a background check, ask for references and require CPR certification. Try websites like sittercity.com, care.com and aupaircare.com.

Most importantly, listen to your gut. If it doesn't sound right, or it doesn't feel right, find an alternative. Every family won't host an au pair, but every child deserves quality care.

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