

THE NANNY CONNECTION

by Vivien Santana Hughes

Employers of live-ins are not just the elite. Middle class families are also enjoying lifestyles of the rich and famous



Dishes were mounting in the sink like an overflowing landfill, the once white floor hadn't seen Spic and Span for days, and clothes were strewn over the furniture—only the baby paraphernalia destroyed the resemblance to a college fraternity house. But this wasn't a dorm room. This was the house of a formerly neat, married couple who have joined the swelling ranks of dual-career parents.

That day began as usual, at 5:15 a.m., so Heather Bolger could pack baby Sullivan's diaper bag, drive her sleepy child to the babysitter's house and still be at work by 7:30 a.m. By 7 that evening—exhausted from a full day as a hospital buyer—she had already donned a nightgown and was contemplating the laundry. Then the doorbell rang: Company.

"I'll never forget that day," says Bolger. "I was so embarrassed."

Working outside the home while raising children is no easy task, and Bolger is not alone. According to the National Commission on Working Women, "The fastest growing segment of the work force is married mothers with

children under 2 years." Since 1970, that figure has increased 129 percent to a whopping 3.1 million. But the most dramatic trend is among first-time mothers age 30 or older—two-thirds are back to work within a year.

Still, knowing many others were in their shoes didn't help with the overload—the Bolgers finally hired a woman to come to their house and care for the baby. Now they wouldn't have it any other way. "There's much less stress in our lives *and* my house is always clean," she says. Evenings and weekends are spent on Quality Time with the baby instead of on chores. "It's worth the sacrifice to pay a little more," says Bolger. And now, even after a long day's work, anyone can stop by unannounced without causing her to reach for the Maalox.

Karen Murphy's weekends were filled with drudgery too, but that inconvenience paled in comparison to troubles with daughter Shannon's childcare center, part of a well-known national chain. Two-year-old Shannon was "bitten eight times in one month—it made me wonder if anyone was watching the kids," she says. Murphy also had to take a lot of time off from her work as a physical therapist for trips to the pediatrician. "The kids are all chewing on the same toys," says Murphy, so Shannon was constantly sick. As the due date approached for her second baby, she realized that having two children at the childcare center was actually more expensive than hiring a live-in housekeeper. While childcare centers in her area charge between \$100 and \$190 per week for infants, starting pay for a live-in is from about \$120 per week for a non-English speaker to \$200 and up for a trained American nanny. When more than one child is involved, the savings can add up.

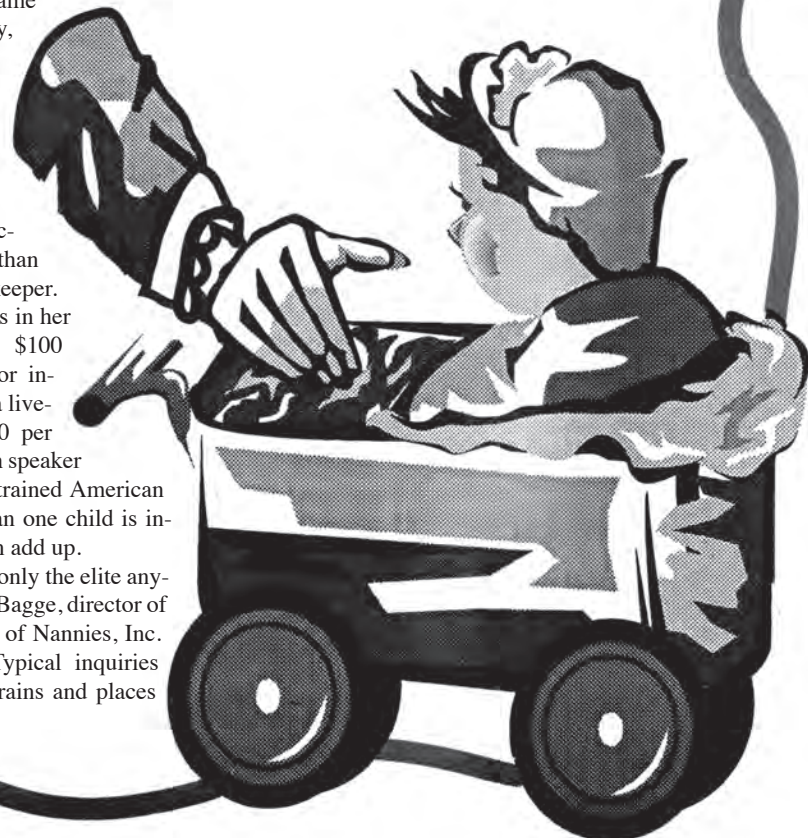
"Our clients are not only the elite anymore," says Marianna Bagge, director of the National Academy of Nannies, Inc. (NANI) in Denver. Typical inquiries to the school, which trains and places

nannies throughout the United States, are made from middle class, two-career families. "Priorities have changed," says Bagge, "families budget to hire a nanny versus buying a new car or a bigger house." Besides convenience, Bagge claims that a consistent caretaker at an early age gives a child a feeling of security and higher self-esteem in the long run.

Finding a caregiver

Once you've made the decision to get someone to watch your child at home, where do you find her? First, know what you're looking for. Elsa Angeleri, owner of Monica Angel Domestic Agency in Sherman Oaks, defines a housekeeper as someone in full charge of the house who helps with the children. A nanny is in full charge of the children, often including driving them to school or pediatrician, but only does child-related housekeeping, such as cleaning the kids' rooms and doing their laundry. Au pairs, usually residents of a foreign country here for a one-year stay, perform tasks similar to those of a nanny, but don't necessarily have formal childcare training.

Domestic agencies will provide you with



applicants that conform to your family's requirements, charging you between 70 percent to more than one month's worth of the nanny's salary for their service. "Screening is what we do," says Angeleri. Services vary widely, but most also offer replacement guarantees for between two and 12 months. Also, Murphy and other parents discovered that personal referrals through other people's housekeepers are another resource. To find nanny school graduates, the International Nanny Association offers a free packet of information on hiring a nanny and a directory (\$10) listing more than 250 nanny placement agencies (INA, P.O. Box 26522, Austin, TX 78755). Agencies are listed in the Yellow Pages under Baby Sitters, Maids and Nannies, or look for ads in *LA. Parent Magazine*.

The interview

Whatever your source, choosing the right person from your pool of candidates can be a daunting task. But the interview process need not be so nerve-racking. "Sit down and talk like you're meeting a friend," says Claudia Kahn, co-owner of Baby Buddies Agency. "Get her coffee, ask about her family, and casually segue into the interview." You don't have to barrage her with questions the first time—second and third interviews are entirely appropriate and recommended. Here's a few topics you shouldn't miss.

- Ask a lot of questions about her family background. "This is really important," says Cindy Hines, placement director of American Nanny College in Montclair, Calif. "No matter how many classes she has had, she will probably revert to how she was brought up." Include inquiries like, what was your family like when you were growing up? How many siblings do you have and what are they doing now? How were you disciplined?

- Get a feeling for her values, morals and beliefs. How should children be disciplined? What three things do you value most in your life? Whom do you most admire and why?

- If previously employed, why did you leave your last job? Are they included in your references?

- Create a scenario: What would you do if our child needed medical attention? If there were an earthquake or other emergency?

- What classes (if interviewing a trained nanny) did you like best? Least?

- How is your health? Do you have any physical limitations that would

affect your job? Have you been vaccinated against the common childhood diseases? Which childhood diseases have you already had?

- How many paid sick and vacation days do you expect? What holidays do you want to have off?

- Are you married or do you have a boyfriend? If yes, when do you expect to see him?

- Do you enjoy cooking? Meal planning?

- Where does your family live? When did you see them last? Do you plan on visiting soon? If far away, have you ever traveled before? Are you homesick?

Things to do:

- Always check references thoroughly. Don't be afraid to ask probing questions of the person giving the reference—no matter how much the referral says, "Oh, she's great!" Bagge, of NANI says, "Ask yourself, 'Will my situation [number and age of children, job requirements, etc.] be similar or different from theirs?'"

- If she'll be chauffeuring the kids around town, obtain a copy of her driving record from the Department of Motor Vehicles.

- Once you know you like her and have checked references, pay her to babysit for a day or weekend and observe how she interacts with the children.

- Trust your instincts. This may sound obvious, but it can't be overemphasized: Even when everything checks out—if it just doesn't feel right, keep interviewing.

Keeping her happy

Just like in a marriage, once you've found the right person, communication is the key. Try to provide a written schedule of what has to be done, recommends Hines, the nanny placement director. To avoid problems later, negotiate everything in advance, such as job duties, time off and holidays. The transition will be smoother if you can take a few days off from work to be at home.

So you don't have to go through this process very often, "Treat her with respect and take a personal interest in her and her family," recommends Vince Varsh, who has had the same nanny caring for his two children for the past six years. Perks don't hurt either—the Varshes provide theirs with a car and have "raised her salary significantly over the years," he adds. Some families offer health insurance as a benefit (policies start at about \$60 per month).

"It would be best if a parent could stay home, but it's such a run-around, crazy world," says Varsh, "having a nanny just brings it all together."

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