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Baby-Sitting Co-ops: Turnabout in Child's Play

Your Money

By HILLARY CHURA JULY 7, 2007

FED up with paying a high school student \$15 an hour to mind their child, an increasing number of parents are turning to baby-sitting co-operatives for free and reliable child care.

A more formal twist on looking after the neighbor's children while a parent runs errands, baby-sitting co-ops are sprouting up in cities, towns and suburbs. They allow groups of families to swap baby-sitting duties with no money involved.

Members hand off their young children to a counterpart, knowing they will do the same for someone else down the road when it is convenient. Because parents tend to have less packed social calendars than many a teenager, pinning down a parental sitter is sometimes less of a frustration than trying to book a high school senior.

In the three years Kris Putz of Sagamore Hills, Ohio, has belonged to a babysitting co-op, she has paid just one sitter. Her co-op has about 10 members but can accommodate 30 families. Some are stay-at-home mothers, like Mrs. Putz; others work full or part time or run their own business. One member is a stay-at-home father.

“Even if you have family that lives within the area, it’s not always reasonable for them to come and sit for a couple of hours when you want to go to a doctor’s appointment,” she said. “With 10 or 15 families, you are usually able to find someone to do what you need.”

As with many co-op members, Mrs. Putz likes the concept of several families sharing baby-sitting duties because she does not feel indebted to any one person who may have watched her daughters, 4 and 1.

“If someone sits for me, I give them points. Then next time, I might sit for someone completely different,” she said. “It’s not like ‘I owe you, you owe me.’ You don’t feel obligated to the same person again the following week.”

Co-ops vary in size from a few families to 30 or more, with children ranging from infants to preteenagers. Larger co-ops tend to be more structured, with spreadsheets, screenings, referrals and references, house visits, written bylaws and secretaries to keep track of parent trades. They may have background checks, medical release forms, newsletters and internal Web sites with passwords, calendars and chats.

Some charge a minimal annual membership fee to cover costs like postage or annual cookouts where members mingle.

Carrie Tortorella of Suffolk, Va., helped start a baby-sitting co-op when she lived in Long Beach, Calif., in 2002. At the time, her son, Hunter, was 6 months old. A virtual teacher, she worked at home but sometimes needed quiet for conference calls. Some members use co-ops for regular child-care while they commute or work, others for ad hoc solutions to mow the lawn, nap or have date night. Some see the groups as a way to meet neighbors and foster a sense of community or to reduce the isolation that parenthood can bring.

Baby-sitting co-ops have been around at least since the current batch of parents was young enough to need supervision. It is impossible to know how many co-ops are in the United States, but Gary Myers, author of “Smart Mom’s Baby-Sitting Co-op Handbook: How We Solved the Baby-Sitter Puzzle” (Tukwila, 2000) said his book had sold as many copies in the last two years as it did in the prior six.

Now in a new state and pregnant with her second child, Mrs. Tortorella is starting another co-op. She handed out fliers in her neighborhood and searched Craigslist.com for interested parents. She has recruited about 10 member families. Other clubs solicit members from churches, nursery school groups or by word of mouth. Mrs. Tortorella said even unreliable sitters in her area cost \$5 an hour, with high school students hitting \$15 an hour in cities like New York.

Financial issues aside, using a co-op can be less trouble than finding a dependable baby-sitter or part-time day care. To alleviate the worry of sending a child to a home they may not have visited, parents in some co-ops have members fill out questionnaires disclosing whether there are pets, guns or smokers in a home, if a child has allergies or if the house is childproof.

Because not all members know each other equally well, there may be annual barbecues so everyone can mingle.

"That's nice because you can get an idea of the heebie-jeebie factor and get to know spouses," Mrs. Tortorella said.

Some have monthly pot luck meals to review how many points people have, discuss future sits and just get together. Children are allowed at some outings, while some clubs schedule evening meetings when fathers can watch the offspring.

With most systems, the child goes to the sitter's home. Clubs have various tracking systems. Some use poker chips, movie tickets or Monopoly money. Others have a point system where, for example, a sitter banks one point an hour a child, with a sliding scale for more children, and a volunteer secretary keeps track of who owes points and who is owed. Clubs may allot extra points for picking up a child, preparing a meal, being late or sitting after midnight. In some co-ops, the secretary arranges the sits. In others, parents make calls independently. Occasionally clubs may limit the number of points a member has or owes to encourage participation.

While the traditional co-op concept is for one-on-one family exchanges, other ideas allow for rotating but standing play dates, where one parent takes several children for a whole day knowing they will give up their brood later in the week. Another take is that at arranged times each week or month, one or two member

families sit for everyone else. While the parents are out on the town, the children gather at one house for pizza, movies and play.

Vashti McCollum Lozier of Stillwater, Minn., joined one of the two co-ops in her neighborhood several years ago when her family was new to the area and had no relatives nearby. Her group, with 16 member families now, can accommodate 20. She said there have been waiting lists, but there is no interview to join. The only preference is that families live in the neighborhood, which is just for practicality.

"The kids love it because they get to play with their own friends," said Mrs. Lozier, who had two daughters when she joined the co-op. "You don't feel bad for asking a favor because the other moms get points for it. In most cases, they really want to do the sit. At monthly meetings, it's almost competitive over taking sits."

Lin Cheyer, a stay-at-home mother in Oakland, Calif., has belonged to a co-op for five years. She uses it not so much for nights out with her husband but during the day when she periodically needs to come and go like a single person. Since nannies are at their regular jobs and high school students are in class, it is tough to find relief when she has the occasional doctor's appointment or pedicure.

Ms. Cheyer said that, ideally, she prefers sitters with children the same age as her 6-year-old son, Noah. This way, children feel as if they are hanging out with friends rather than being stuck with a baby-sitter.

"It's like a play date," she said. "The child gets to have fun, and you don't have to pay for it."

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