



Before You Hire a Babysitter: What You Should Know

You're going to a much-anticipated social event and have successfully secured a babysitter. So far, so good. But does the sitter have what it takes to ensure your outing is worry-free for you and safe and happy for your kids? Childcare experts say trust and crisis management are the two most important skills the caregiver should possess. What else?

Finding a Sitter You Trust

Accidental injuries are the leading cause of death in children over age 1 in the U.S. Five children under 5 die every day from accidents in the home. Because teenagers are a large source of today's baby sitters, it is important that they learn or know proper safety skills in case of emergency.

Where to Look and What to Ask

The best place to start looking is within the community you know: your church, local schools, your workplace. Once you have some names, it's important to check references. These may come from teachers, youth group leaders or from other families who have used the sitter. When you contact families the sitter has worked for, ask how many kids they have. Also, find out if they ever had any problems with the way the sitter interacted with their kids.

Observe Sitter Interaction with Your Kids

The next step is to invite the sitter over to ask questions and see how he or she interacts with your children. This type of interaction shows how much your prospective sitter likes kids and if he or she is open to your methods of parenting. Be sure to ask about the sitter's training in first aid or CPR. Discuss what he or she may do in certain emergency situations. A competent sitter will be able to answer these questions and prove he or she can handle the job.

Early Arrival Is the Key

After you hire a sitter, have him or her come to your house a half-hour before you leave to go over all emergency issues. "More than half the parents who leave their children with baby sitters under 16 don't leave emergency telephone numbers," says Dr. Keener.

Discuss House Rules & Leave Contact Info

Make sure you discuss your rules with the sitter and always leave a number where you can be reached at all times. In the event of a life-threatening emergency, a medical professional is permitted to treat your child, experts say. But if it is a non-life-threatening injury, they will need parental consent to treat.

Call Home!

During the evening, be sure to call home, especially if you are not easily accessible. Call home at a time when you may be able to head off a potential problem, such as a half-hour after bedtime when the kids may be refusing to go to sleep. You could suggest some ways for the sitter to convince them it is bedtime.

Get a Debriefing

Consider debriefing the sitter when you get home. Ask specifically about areas where you think the sitter may have had trouble. Often sitters think your child's behavior is a reflection on them and may be reluctant to admit any behavioral problems unless asked. Choosing a sitter with training in handling emergencies and checking the sitter's references will make you more comfortable and your children safer.

Is He or She Qualified?

Check your sitter's qualifications against these characteristics recommended by the American Red Cross Babysitter's Training Program: First aid/CPR training; Maturity; Good judgment; Common sense; Friendly personality; Responsible; Nonsmoker; Healthy; Neat; and Organized. But, beyond any qualifications, go with your heart. Do you trust this person with your child?