

Finding a Nanny in Chicago

By Maria Christopoulos Katris, NPN Member since 2005

Finding in-home childcare can be an intimidating and exhausting experience. It's important to feel confident that your child is in good hands before you head back to work. Following is a step-by-step guide to assist you as you begin your nanny search.

Step 1: Identify your needs

Here are a few questions to help identify your family needs:

- > What is my annual budget for childcare?
- > What type of work schedules will I and/or my spouse undertake? How many hours? How much travel?
- > What activities and duties do I require of a childcare provider?
- > What qualities are most important based on my values and needs?
- > What is my budget for finding a nanny (agency fees)?
- > How much time do I have to contribute to finding a nanny?

Step 2: Investigate resources

Both online resources and nanny placement agencies exist to assist your family's search. However, the costs and assistance offered vary significantly with these options, so it pays to do your homework first.

> Online resources and word-of-mouth. These options cost little to nothing, but may not provide identity checks, legal status verification, reference checks, background screening, or personal evaluations of the candidates. If you choose one of these routes, it could take a lot more time and investigation on your end. Also keep in mind that what works for one family may not work for your family. Make sure to conduct your own research on the candidate.

> Nanny placement agencies. There are many benefits to using a full-service agency. Most agencies conduct background checks of candidates, hire and manage materials, and schedule interviews, which can save you time. However, agencies require a placement fee for finding nannies. Ask upfront what the placement fee is and when it is due. No licensed agency in Illinois should ask for an application fee. (Illinois licensed agencies can only collect a fee if they find you a nanny candidate. Contact the Department of Labor for more information.) Also note that some agencies charge both the nanny and the family a placement fee, so prices will vary among agencies.

Step 3: Work with an agency

Here are a few thoughts to keep in mind when working with an agency:

- > Ask the agency if they are licensed and bonded. Verify this by contacting the Department of Labor or asking the agency for a copy of their certificate.
- > Not every agency offers every service in every location. Verify you are working with an agency that can provide the type of nanny you are looking for (i.e.

part-time or full-time, live-in or live-out), and make sure they are able to provide candidates in your neighborhood (city or suburbs). Interview a few agencies before choosing one. Every agency is different in terms of priorities, customer service, responsiveness, and culture.

> Finding a nanny is as much a "personality" fit as it is a "qualifications" fit. Give the agency plenty of information so they can identify your best match. Depending on your requirements, the agency may not be able to provide the "perfect" candidate. The key is to make sure the agency communicates with your family on a consistent basis so that you can explore alternate arrangements if necessary.

> Agencies vary in their processes and the number of candidates they provide for screening. Be clear on this from the start and ensure that you are working with an agency whose process is aligned with your expectations. Do they verify legal working status? What background checks do they conduct? What materials do they provide?

> It will usually take four to eight weeks to find a nanny through an agency. Be clear on your start date and set

your expectations accordingly. Agencies maintain a pool of candidates, but if your timeframe is tight, don't expect a miracle.

Step 4: Interview candidates

Once you have identified a potential nanny and the interview is set, what do you ask? What is appropriate? Some agencies offer their clients a list of questions and items to discuss with a prospective nanny. The NPN website also offers an interview guide with a long list of sample questions. Here is a list of topics you want to cover in any interview with a nanny:

- > Personal background
- > Experience
- > Responsibilities
- > Driving and transportation
- > Hours and vacation
- > Salary and benefits

Step 5: Make an offer

Once you choose a candidate to hire, use a family/nanny contract. They are a great way to write on paper what your expectations are of the nanny and what he or she should expect from your family. This helps avoid miscommunication and poor performance. Again, some agencies offer sample family/nanny contracts for your use and can assist you through this process. The NPN website offers excellent information on nanny contracts, including a sample contract that you can personalize. ■

Maria Christopoulos Katris is a former summer nanny and owner of Nanny Boutique, Inc. (www.nannyboutique.com). Maria will also be completing her M.B.A. in December from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

