

by Melinda Blau

# Intimate Strangers

## LIVING WITH A CAREGIVER

With careful planning, you can have peace, privacy, and the benefits that a modern-day Mary Poppins offers.

**J**ILL STERN, a teacher in upstate New York, decided to hire a live-in childcare worker when she was pregnant with the youngest of her children, who are now 7, 8, and 10. "I just wanted another pair of hands," she says. For Stern, life with a stranger in the house has been relatively painless. Her secret? Respect. "I treat her the way I expect her to treat me," she explains. "A lot of people get upset when the housekeeper is watching TV. I don't care as long as she gets her job done."

Stern is one of a growing number of parents who are willing to trade a bit of privacy for readily available childcare and emotional support. Roughly 1.4 million children are cared for in the home by non-relatives, according to the 1990 National Child Care Study by the Urban Institute in Washington, DC. About 500,000 of them are cared for by live-ins, says Sandra Hofferth, a senior research associate. By all indications, that number is rising.

It's not surpris- (Continued on page 36)

ing that parents would jump at the idea of hiring a loving and efficient Mary Poppins. More than half of mothers with children younger than 3 hold jobs and then return home for what sociologist Arlie Hochschild has dubbed the "second shift." But employing round-the-clock help can be daunting. "Having someone live in introduces a whole new relationship and changes the dynamic of the family," says Barbara Reisman, director of the Child Care Action Campaign in New York City. "It's not exactly an employee/employer relationship. It has to be carefully managed."

### Getting Off to a Good Start

The first step is deciding what type of employee—an au pair, a nanny, or a housekeeper—will best suit your family's needs. An au pair, typically a young woman, takes care of children in exchange for room, board, and the cultural experience of living in a different place. If your children are older and experience isn't a big concern

but budget is, an au pair may work out fine.

Look for a more seasoned nanny if you're away from home a lot or if you have children who are younger, have special needs, or require lots of homework help. Since nannies tend to focus primarily on childcare, consider hiring a housekeeper if you need help around the house as well.

Laying a solid groundwork with your caregiver means:

- Discussing every imaginable detail before she begins working: salary, bonuses, days off, vacations, overtime, TV and kitchen privileges, use of a car, off-limits areas, long-distance calls, and visitors.
- Letting her know what she's in for right away; piling on more work over time inevitably leads to resentment.
- Asking her to keep a daily log to assess her performance in the future.
- Helping her cultivate a social life by offering information about churches, neighborhood centers or health clubs. "Some nannies are very lonely on the job," says

Marianna Bagge, director of the National Academy of Nannies in Denver. "They have no other adult contact."

### Living Happily Ever After

Every family's formula for success is slightly different. Jack and Anita Foster's successful five-year relationship with the caregiver who shares their Houston home is based on fairness and decency. "We restrict her duties to the children," Jack explains. "We don't ask her to shop, clean the house, or work on weekends. Occasionally, at night we'll even hire a sitter."

Some families prefer an au pair or nanny to disappear when they get home; others want her to eat dinner with them or join them on vacation. Since such gatherings mean more than one adult will be in charge, clarify your live-in's role to avoid disputes. The parents should always be in charge, with the caregiver as a support.

Flexibility is crucial, particularly when you're living with someone whose eating

habits, ideas about children, religion, and values may be different from your own. If you're unsatisfied with your nanny's performance or disagree about her methods of discipline, speak up. Offer helpful critiques of her performance in private. Be honest and direct, Bagge says, but don't be "accusatory." Rather than saying, "You're not changing the baby right," or "That's not how I told you to do it," Bagge suggests saying, "When you change the baby, here's how I'd like you to do it."

Also consider your role. Were your expectations clear? Might your feelings be clouding the issue? Sure, you're delighted that your child loves his nanny, but don't be surprised if you feel jealous that she saw your baby take his first step or coaxed your anxious 3-year-old down the slide. The ambivalence is natural, experts say.

"It can be a big problem with an insecure mother, or a mother who is not clear in her own mind about how she wants to raise her children," says Deena Harris, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at Columbia University in New York City.

Finally, to keep any valued employee, one must provide "perks" with no strings

## 6 Caregiver Extras You Probably Haven't Thought Of

1. a driver's license
2. a green card
3. nutritional savvy
4. a good sense of direction
5. computer know-how
6. training in first aid and CPR

attached. Nannies often demand two weeks' paid vacation, four to six paid holidays, "sick days," social security payments, and medical insurance. Some families add bonuses, a telephone, unlimited use of a car, and an allowance for trips home.

### A Delicate Balance

In successful long-term situations, a live-in often begins to feel "like family." But Marsha Epstein, president of American Au Pair

in Boston, says that it's better to treat her as "a professional adjunct, a team member."

"If you reveal too much about your personal life, your secrets, or your marital problems, it's harder for you to have the authority you need," Epstein warns. "On the other hand, you can't treat them coldly or expect them to dissolve into the woodwork at six o'clock. You have to extend somewhat emotionally." The key is to be as concerned, compassionate, and responsive as you would be with any employee.

In short, when a live-in employee feels valued and respected, and when clear boundaries are drawn, the relationship flourishes, and everyone wins. Having a competent live-in frees parents to give kids what they need most: unconditional love, says psychologist Faye Crosby, Ph.D., author of *Juggling: The Unexpected Advantages of Balancing Career and Home for Women and Their Families*. "Children gain by learning to trust many adults," she says. "And besides, the more people that love your children, the better off they are." ■

*Contributing editor Melinda Blau specializes in family and mental health issues. She is currently writing a book on co-parenting.*