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Home Help!



Rebecca Fletcher AKA our blogger 'Margot tries the goodlife' shares her ups and downs of childcare conundrums upon moving to the country

Choosing the right sort of childcare to suit your family's needs can be a minefield. Where do you start? Recommendations, nanny agencies, recruitment websites, Gumtree? Local councils do offer childcare search facilities on their websites but for most first-time mothers (or even experienced ones), the multitude of childcare options can be daunting and unfamiliar territory.

When our first child was born, the prospect of leaving her in someone else's care aged six months filled both my husband and I with a good deal of apprehension. We knew very little about what to look for in a potential nanny or whether other options such as full time nursery or a local childminder might work better for us as a family. Long hours at work for both of us meant that a nanny seemed the best option in the end, plus the fact that our little dot could be cared for in her own environment. Canvassing opinion from a couple we'd met at NCT classes, it seemed that our worries were shared ones. We ended up opting for a nanny share - an arrangement with the same couple which was to last until our babies were almost two years old. Acting on a recommendation from someone local whose nanny was leaving the family after 5 years of service, the process from initial

meeting to first day in the job was pretty painless. I suppose you could call it gut instinct but when I met her, she was reassuring and knew exactly how to placate a nervous mother worried about returning to work, not to mention the fact that the prospect of looking after two babies at once seemed to be more of a pleasure to her than a chore. Sharing a nanny had its challenges but the benefits outweighed any negative aspects and we felt that our babies were in good hands.

Talking to other mothers about their experiences gave me food for thought. A recommendation is clearly worth its weight in gold. "Our maternity nurse was recommended to us by a friend who swore by her. As a first time mother, I felt that I didn't really know what I was doing and having someone there to guide me and show me what to do was just what I needed," mother of three, Lucinda, tells me. "I wouldn't have been without a maternity nurse following any of my births."

But what happens if you don't have a recommendation? Experienced Norland nanny, Sarah Wheeler, who runs 'The Maternity Nanny' offering maternity services as well as sleep solutions care for parents, advises: "A good place to start when considering whether or not to choose a particular maternity nurse

or night nanny, is reading her references and testimonials. Most night nannies and maternity nurses have websites and they should have recent references available for you to read. These will also be provided by an agency if you are using one."

"A night nanny or maternity nurse will spend lots of time with you at a very intimate time in your family's life and at times a new mother can feel very vulnerable. Someone once described my approach as a mixture of 'a best friend and a caring aunt!'"

By far the fastest growing form of childcare is to be found closer to home, however. With the growing cost of going back to work hitting all modern families, it's no wonder that so many of us are now looking to grandparents to offer ad hoc babysitting services. "My parents take my kids either en masse or individually, as and when I need help. I'm very lucky they live close by and are fit, healthy and very able," shares Issy Langly-Smith, mother of three and founder of frozen wholesome baby food, Kiddie Cubes. "The thing with grandparents is they are an amazing parent substitute, after all that's where we learnt our parenting style from! If I can't attend something really important for the kids, far from being disappointed, the children see it as a special treat to have my parents there instead."

Hands-on experience combined with genuine love for the child are key benefits of grandparent care and I certainly don't know how I would manage week-to-week without my own mother's help. However, for those without parents in easy reach, Country Child's Jo and Sarah met Granny Au pair, a unique recruitment agency offering a fantastic alternative. Based in Germany, this agency specialises in placing experienced 'grannies' with families to look after the children and help with housekeeping in return for board and lodging. Having placed more than 500 women in 40 or so countries, it seems to be proving a pretty popular option too. I'm already thinking of giving them a call to see if I can hire the services of a Mrs Doubtfire to support me during the long summer holidays!

Help and further information



Do check your local town or village noticeboards for nanny agency adverts in your area, as well as childminders and nannies. Ask at toddler, mother and baby sessions or other parents at the school gates for recommendations too.

Hampshire County Council offers a range of information on childcare as well as for various agencies and other emergency type childcare. It has a webpage dedicated to grandparents who support families with day to day childcare too.

The Family Information Directory from Dorset County Council also offers information and advice on the types of childcare available in the area, as does Wiltshire Council's Childcare Online Directory.

Childcare.co.uk is a great resource too and with over 1,000,000 members nationwide, it offers an award winning online social networking platform for parents, childcare providers and private tutors. Members have to pay a fee to advertise their services and those seeking to hire pay a small amount to access individual information of candidates they are interested in.



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