

FINDING YOUR PERFECT POPPINS

BY CHRISTINA BOYLE CUSH
ILLUSTRATIONS BY TRACY DOCKRAY



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How to select — and keep — the best nanny for your family

NEEED SOMEONE TO HELP with your children's carpooling, laundry, cooking and errands? Wouldn't it be nice if that person could also swim, teach your kids German or Spanish, split her time with your family in Greenwich and Palm Beach, and travel with you? Is it asking too much for a nanny to be computer-savvy to ensure that your kids aren't logging on for trouble during recreational on-screen time? When it comes to job descriptions for nannies in this area, the sky is the limit. The tricky part is finding the nanny who is compatible with your wish list.



The first thing to recognize is that finding a good nanny takes hard work. Just ask Lisa Lori, an Old Greenwich mom of three boys, ages four, five and seven, who runs her own Greenwich-based public relations and marketing communications agency (for high-profile clients like the New York City Opera, Saks Fifth Avenue and the Princess Grace Foundation). As with most working moms, her childcare needs evolve as her children mature and her job responsibilities shift.

“For the first four years of motherhood, we had au pairs who lived with us,” says Lisa. “This was good at the time because my office was based down in SoHo, and I needed a very flexible schedule to help with the children [live-in au pairs typically work up to forty-five hours a week on a malleable schedule that you control]. But now because my children are in school all day or part of the day, and a typical week for me is working from my home or my Greenwich office a few half days and going into the city for client meetings and events, which are often at night, we use live-out, part-time nanny help. For a while, I’ve been working with the Katie Facey agency in Greenwich to find someone to help with the kids and some of my nonprofit business errands for the charity PR work I do.”

Fairfield County is ripe with dynamic moms like Lisa who are raising children while working. According to childcare experts in this country, 48 percent of dual-income families like the Loris are turning to their own families for help rearing the kids. But in our part of the world, where many families are Manhattan transplants (originating from other states), and many jobs are transitory, asking Granny to be your nanny may not be feasible because she may not live close by. Or she may not want the gig because she’s been there, done that — or has a job herself. So what’s a working mom to do with her brood? Many local moms, especially those who are time-crunched and leery of looking for a nanny on their own, turn to reputable agencies — like Katie Facey, the Lindquist Group of Greenwich or LifeWorx in New Canaan — for help.

Bal Agrawal, president of LifeWorx, says, “A third of our profits come from nanny placements. Many New York City residents move into the community for a better quality of family life. There is then the commute and increased work hours, hence the need for nannies.” Agencies are an appealing alternative because they offer:

- Discretion (say you want to replace your current nanny)
- Convenience (saves you time not having to do all the screening)
- Experience (familiar with the ins and outs of household employment)
- Responsiveness (they can often respond with fully screened, viable candidates within forty-eight hours)
- Backup (you will always have a Plan B if your nanny is sick or if she is off-duty and you find yourself in a jam)

Of course, if the nanny placement turns out to be a mismatch, most agencies will help you remove her and find a more suitable choice. All of this peace of mind and customer service costs big bucks, though. If you work with a high-end agency in this area, you can expect to pay an agency fee of \$5,000 to \$15,000 and at least \$40,000 per year to the nanny.

DO-IT-YOURSELF-SEARCH

Perhaps because agency fees are so hefty, many moms prefer to take charge of the nanny search themselves. We consulted with local childcare experts and moms to find out how to get started.

1. The right personality

Write down what qualities are important to you and consider what our experts deem important:

- Knowledge of child development. Nannies who understand why children behave as they do are more likely to respond to children appropriately.
- Emotional maturity. A nanny who can control her own reactions and who can soothe a child's volatile emotions is less likely to become overwhelmed and burned out.
- Relevant experience. If you have a newborn, you want a nanny who has cared for them before.
- Enjoys kids. Most nannies like children and want to be part of the family dynamic. If she is happy, playful and creative, she will probably be a natural around kids.
- Safety-conscious. If you are neurotic, you may want your nanny to be just as careful as you are.
- Hardworking and responsible. It's important that she show up where and when she's supposed to.

2. Job description

While coming up with your list, the rule of thumb is to be realistic: You can't expect a nanny to handle more than you can. For example, if you can't cook dinner while watching your three active kids, you shouldn't ask your nanny to do that either. Rather, you may need her to watch the kids while you cook or vice versa. According to Kristen King, a nanny counselor at the Lindquist Group, professional nannies typically take care of the children's laundry, meals, cleaning and errands. While it is not out of the question to ask the nanny to do some light housework or cooking, it is critical that such non-child-related duties be clearly spelled out and agreed to up front.

"Most nannies are very helpful. They are just leery of stories they hear about women who take a nanny job and six months later are cleaning an entire house," says Kristen.

Ciara Thurlow echoes the importance of job clarity. A Darien mom of three boys under four, founder of CPT Styling (a business that provides personal shopping services as well as wardrobe coordinating and accessorizing) and co-head coach of the Wilton High School Girls' Varsity lacrosse team, she is constantly on the go. Ciara found her current nanny through Monarch, a New York City-based agency, and is enjoying a successful relationship because she took the time to spell out the rules and expectations on a three-page document.

"I am very happy. There was not any room for misunderstandings and no question as to what my wants and needs were," Ciara explains.

3. Cast a wide net

Some moms place ads at job boards at local universities and nursing schools. Others advertise in local newspapers or on nanny websites. Sometimes finding a great nanny is done through e-mailing your network of friends, family, neighbors and school connections. When networking, you may discover that a wonderful nanny is becoming available soon because her family doesn't need her anymore (the kids are in school or mom stopped working). Or you may have the good fortune of benefiting from a connection's recent nanny search: She may have talked to someone that wasn't quite right for her, but is ideal for you.

4. The interview

Once you have found some viable candidates, you can prep for the interview process. You don't have to invite anyone to your home if you aren't comfortable with it. You can meet at a coffee shop or another spot of your choice. Some general tips on managing the interview process:

- Pay attention to the candidate's eye contact and body language. If she can't look you in the eye or seems fidgety, she may not be telling the truth.
- Ask her how she would handle scenarios such as a fussy baby or a temper tantrum.
- Make sure that she is truly interested in child development and is willing to continue her professional development.
- Be rigorous when asking about gaps in work history or job-hopping. Note any excuses the candidate makes.

Have her provide as many work references as possible and get back to you promptly with any contact information she doesn't know offhand.

5. References

It helps to write down what's important to you and your family before calling past employers. For example, if you want your children playing outside a lot, ask references about a candidate's activity levels and enthusiasm. When talking to former employers, remember that they are generally generous. Here's a compilation of what our safety expert James Hirtenstein, president of Manhattan-based babysafeamerica.com, and agency folks say you should listen closely for:

- Strong intangibles. The nanny should have demonstrated a history of being reliable, trustworthy and honest.
- Anything that suggests mediocrity if you are striving for excellence.
- What people say as well as what they are not saying.
- How the potential candidate manages stress.
- How the reference sounds on the phone. Do they sound very young or old, or possibly unfamiliar with the candidate?

WORKING GIRLS

A busy working mom of three, Allison Haupt conducted her most recent nanny search without the help of an agency. The Darien resident, who holds down a demanding job as the director of Client Service at New Jersey-based Lord, Abbett & Co. and is also the proud mom of two girls under six and a baby boy, Allison found the most success using an e-mail network through her children's preschool, in addition to her network of family and friends.

"We ended up interviewing approximately ten nannies through that network," she says. "We found our first nanny through a family friend, and she worked with us for four and a half years. The search to replace her was extremely challenging and stressful. Through a neighbor's recommendation, we hired a woman who lasted only a month. Since then we've hired another nanny, and she has been great. Our nanny is integral to the success of our lives."

Despite their rigorous search efforts, Allison says they found their nanny through plain old luck. "My mom saw a woman, who looked very nice, walking with some children in her Rowayton neighborhood. Mom had seen her before and decided to ask if she knew anyone looking for a job. This nice woman bumped into her friend later that day. This friend had a job but was looking for a change. We hired the friend, and the rest is history. The kids love her. We know the children are happy and well cared for, and that's most important."

SO MANY KIDS, SO LITTLE TIME

In addition to bustling dual-income families, many families in this area seek out professional childcare because they have a lot of kids.

Agrawal says many of LifeWorx's requests are from moms who say they simply lack time. "The family size is becoming larger in our community. Many families that we serve have three to five children. Even when mom is full-time with the children, she needs a clone of herself to drive some of the children to activities," he explains. Stay-at-home moms need to find a nanny who is easy to be around, happy to pitch in and willing to follow mom's lead. A nanny of a work-outside-the-home mom would probably need to be more self-directed.

Westport mom of three kids under seven, Finley Shaw struck nanny gold on craigslist.com. She and Belinda, her nanny, exemplify the hands-on, tag-team approach to child-rearing that multitudes of moms use on a daily basis. Finley describes a daily itinerary: "My day with the nanny starts around 7:30 a.m. Belinda will get my two-year-old dressed, then help with breakfast for the other two. I make the lunches while she gets the kids in coats and shoes. Then I gather the homework and we leave the house around 8 a.m. I take the three kids with me so Belinda can clean up breakfast, make the beds and do the laundry. I come back around lunchtime and either she or I feed the youngest. Then I leave to pick up my middle child at 1:30. Belinda stays home while the baby naps and usually watches TV or takes a nap herself. I am out doing various errands or play dates with my middle child until we pick up the seven-year-old at 3:30. I'm home around 4 p.m. with the two big kids. Belinda wakes up the baby and plays with the kids for an hour while I fix dinner. After dinner, she will start the bath and I will clean up the kitchen."

Even with an extra set of hands to pitch in during a carefully orchestrated, jam-packed day, many moms are relieved when their kids are finally asleep in bed. That's how they know it's worth the effort to find a good nanny and to work through communication glitches to keep everybody happy. Finley says, "Belinda tells me when she is upset or needs something and I do the same. We have a good relationship because we work together and I don't take advantage of her. If she works extra hours, I always give her more money."

Agrawal confirms that communication is key to a good nanny bond. "If you wait until there is a full-blown conflict under way, you often have irreparable trust issues and have to go back to the drawing board," he says.

Another big issue to consider before you hire a nanny is your approach to disciplining the kids. Consider your nanny a partner. Then you can allow her to discipline your kids under your guidelines and be sure that the two of you are consistent in implementing rules. An important, yet often overlooked, practice is to tell the nanny who is the boss when mom is around. The kids can't see you overrule the nanny. It's best for them and her.

NANNY NEGOTIATIONS

After your initial round of interviews, you are ready to narrow the field and get down to the nitty-gritty of negotiating. Beyond being treated well, families need to keep in mind that this is a career. It needs to be treated as such. According to our experts, that means your discussion should involve:

- Hours
- Pay and overtime
- Holidays off
- Sick time
- Raises
- Healthcare benefits
- Travel opportunities

Some families take the nanny relationship to the next level and send their nanny to a conference on childhood development or enroll her in an evening class at a community college to pursue the other passions in her life.

Agrawal says, "If the nanny feels good about what she is doing, appreciated by her employer and influential in the lives of the children, there is a much greater likelihood she will stay and work very hard for the family." Who could ask for anything more?