

Healthy Expectations For In-Home Childcare

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In the United States, childcare is an unavoidable challenge for parents and parents-to-be across the income spectrum. Giddy Instagram posts revealing sonogram pictures are often followed by fevered texts to friends who have already become parents: “Do your kids go to daycare?” “Do your parents take care of them?” “How do you afford it?” With no meaningful public option for early childhood care and no guaranteed paid leave for parents of any gender, the United States faces a childcare crisis. More shocking still is that even when a spot in an average daycare can cost more per month than a family’s mortgage, the (overwhelmingly female) population of loving professionals who take care of children in these settings earn startlingly low salaries in environments with little opportunity for growth or advancement. It is a broken system, and parents and caregivers alike are admirably trying to navigate it with minimal public support. This is detrimental to careers, and more importantly to work-life balance - if you have limited access to childcare and have to work within a daycare or other provider’s schedule, your life and work are both likely to suffer.

Against this grim landscape, the quaint archetype of the Nanny seems like the ideal solution to the problem of who will take care of your children when you go to work, especially if having control over childcare schedules and styles will meaningfully contribute to your work-life balance. With the fear of separation that can come with dropping your child off at a daycare, it is enticing to imagine that you could pay an experienced professional to come to your home and do everything for your children – and *only* your children – to your exact specifications. The right nanny can become a life-long, cherished family member, but nannies are also employees. It can be easy to forget because they work inside your home, but nannies are professionals who deserve to be compensated fairly and protected just like in any workplace. This means that every

family who might wish to employ one will not find a nanny to be within their means. It is crucial that when considering your family's interest in hiring a nanny, you develop healthy expectations of what a nanny can do and what they should be paid. There are often *no* good options for childcare, which is a travesty. But it is not the responsibility of a nanny to correct that travesty through unreasonable working conditions.

In a 2016 study by Lair, MacLeod, and Budgar, the researchers collected advertisements for nanny positions posted on Craigslist and evaluated them for unreasonable hours and unreasonable pay. Focusing on San Francisco and Los Angeles, they conclude that many ads describe exploitative working conditions, and that since the potential employers posting these ads do not feel the need to hide these conditions, it can be determined that many people looking for a nanny do not believe their expectations are unreasonable. Examples include a 47-hour workweek offering \$150 per week, a 25-hour workweek compensated in only room and board, and a position in which the applicant was expected to be prepared for a shift that started at 6:00 AM on Monday and ended at 6:00 AM on Friday. Many ads emphasized that the parents could not afford to pay more but really needed a nanny, implying their belief that anyone who wants a nanny should be able to have one, and that unreasonable conditions were reasonable for this type of worker.

Before deciding to hire a nanny, it is important to meaningfully research what the job actually is and carefully examine your ability to adopt the legal and ethical burden of being an employer. Some aspects of having a nanny that may be surprising include:

- Nannies must make at or above minimum wage and be paid for overtime.

- A nanny is always an employee, and never an independent contractor. An in-home employer is responsible for the same payroll taxes as any other employer.
- It is against industry standard to “charge” a live-in nanny for room and board, and doing so will cause the employer to also be a landlord, giving the nanny the same protections as a tenant.
- If you do decide to “charge” a live-in nanny for room and board, it is illegal to factor that contribution to a nanny’s salary as more than \$54.38 per week for the purposes of determining minimum wage.

If you cannot afford a qualified nanny, options for securing good, affordable childcare are limited, but a little creativity can go a long way. Avenues to explore include:

- Home-based family daycares
- A nanny-share with a compatible family
- Daycare subsidies and other help provided by the government
- Informal arrangements with friends and family members

In the meantime, you can effect great change by advocating for better childcare options through local and national politics, your workplace, and your community. Change is crucial in our broken childcare system, but the burden must not be felt by the employees performing the care.

It is not unusual for nannies to work more than 40 hours a week, since any time the parents work will usually need to be covered by the nanny. Many nannies are happy to work 45-50 hours per week and earn legal overtime for any hours that exceed 40. But nannies are still people who have lives that include more than just work. Nannies, like everyone else, want to be with their families, take care of themselves, and explore interests outside of work. If your childcare needs consistently include more than 50 hours of weekly in-home childcare, you should consider splitting the job between two people.

The false belief that nannies can survive on unlivable wages or live full lives with unmanageable hours is the manifestation of an othering of people who perform domestic work. Parents may also feel desperate to find quality childcare within their budget, and post ads promising the low wages they can afford to pay in the hopes that it will work for some potential candidates. This leads to unqualified or deeply marginalized people performing underpaid domestic work and furthers false beliefs about domestic workers. There are few good options for childcare in the United States today, and it is not surprising that parents believe someone should fix that. But before you decide that someone should be a nanny, it is your responsibility to ensure you truly have the resources and desire to be a genuine employer.

Reference

Lair, C. D., MacLeod, C., & Budgar, E. (2016). Advertising unreasonable expectations: Nanny ads on Craigslist. *Sociological Spectrum*, 36(5), 286–302.

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