

Bringing Up

Baby

Finding quality childcare in Denver is anything but child's play. We're here to help.

CHRISTINA SCHMIEDER WAS almost too late. It was January and her daughter Eva was already a month old when she and her husband, Neil, started looking for full-time childcare. Christina planned to resume her career as a marketing director at Janus Capital Group in March. "People laughed at us," she says. "They'd say, 'We'll have a spot open in August.'" The parents soldiered on, admittedly desperate but not so desperate they would compromise on quality. The Schmieders' requirements? The place had to be clean and have lower ratios than the state-licensing requirement (five infants per adult), and they wanted to see those teachers interacting with the babies. "I didn't want Eva stuck in a swing all day," Christina says.

To make matters worse, the Schmieders didn't have any family in town as backup babysitters. "We were lucky because we could have afforded a nanny if we didn't find a place, or we probably could've begged and pleaded for one of our moms to come out and help until we found daycare," she admits. But the Schmieders preferred the checks-and-balances insurance policy of several adults staffing a licensed agency rather than leaving Eva with a single nanny.

After dozens of phone calls and a handful of visits, the Schmieders did find a childcare center that fit the bill—but their concession was a 45-minute drive from their Wash Park home to Parker Road and

Cliff Avenue. In rush hour it was even worse, but Christina says the high-quality center was worth the drive. And for a few months, they made the trip daily. Then the Schmieders discovered Family Flex in the Golden Triangle, a brand-new center that offers traditional childcare along with extended hours for parents who put in long hours at the office or who might just want a sitter for a much-needed date night. It was the same high-quality care much closer to home. "And we like that those options [extended hours] are there," she says. "We've used them for work events, but not for a date yet—my husband still owes me a movie night."

All in all, the Schmieders had it pretty good. They found not one but two childcare providers that fit their criteria. Even so, the experience was daunting. "I'm sure I cried during the process, but mostly I got angry," says Christina. "It was depressing; we pretty much talked about it every night. I don't know what people do—it sucks."

Ask around: Even parents who are happy with their childcare situation will tell you the search was miserable. "When it comes to preschool, Denver is good and actually getting better," says Barbara O'Brien, president of the Colorado Children's Campaign, a Denver-based nonprofit. "But when it comes to care for infants and toddlers, we see a very different picture. It's hard to find a good-quality program,

and childcare in Denver is very expensive." Full-time infant care costs more than \$10,000 annually, according to a report from the Piton Foundation, a Denver-based nonprofit. Looking at the fees for many high-end centers, many Denver families pay more.

Childcare is a challenge for Denver families: expensive, hard to find, and a nagging issue for a good portion of our population. The Piton Foundation reports more than half of Denver kids less than 5 years old need childcare. That's almost 21,000 kids. Ultimately, new parents are faced with a decision that requires a brutal reality check: How much can we afford? How do we pick the stranger who gets to spend all day with our precious baby? And is the situation a good fit for his or her developmental needs?

The good news is parents don't have to go it alone. There are organizations out there committed to improving early childhood education in Denver and aiding parents in finding and evaluating the best spots. And there are other parents who've been down this road before who can help. We've asked these local experts for advice on navigating the quest. From policy-makers to childcare providers, nanny agencies to experienced Denver moms, they all agree on one thing: The trick to getting started is knowing how to get connected. Consider this your introduction to the Mile-High Mommy Network.

EDITED BY REBECCA LANDWEHR

Nanny Love

It's tough to find Ms. Right in the Mile-High City.

THE ORIGINAL SUPER NANNY—Mary Poppins—arrived just in the nick of time, dangling from her flying umbrella. In Walt Disney's London, all it took was a hopeful child's song to snag a prime caregiver.

But here in real-life Denver, finding the right nanny is something like a speed-dating scene from *Sex and the City*. Picture a round-robin of polite interrogation between total strangers, everyone desperately seeking some kind of chemistry. Meanwhile, in their heads the parties silently consider the long-term potential amid the pool.

In truth, searching for the right nanny isn't all that different from modern dating. Sometimes it's a savvy friend-in-the-know who'll set you up with the perfect match. Then there's always the online route—check out the childcare section (filled with boastful personal ads from both nannies and families) on Craigslist.org, a free, web-based community clearinghouse. Other times it's a proposition that's about as subtle as a bar-scene pickup. "We had one nanny who was out pushing a stroller down the street when a man followed her in his car and said, 'Whatever they're paying

you—I'll double it,'" says Ginger Swift, president of ABC Nannies & Domestic, a Denver-based nanny placement agency. "And I'm not really that surprised. Parents will always notice a great nanny."

And ultimately, for many people, as it is with dating, there comes a time to bring in the professionals—matchmakers like ABC's Swift. Often, the families who can afford nannies don't want to invest a lot of time tracking one down. Enter the agencies: businesses that tackle the legwork and deliver qualified, prescreened nannies to your doorstep. The placement pros interview the nannies, check their references, and pay for extensive background checks, for a fee that ranges from \$800 to \$1,900 and up. But mostly what parents pay for is the agencies' "nanny filter," a combination of experience and intuition from the staff that does the screening. And that gut feeling only comes with years of experience. "In an interview, most nannies will tell you what you want to hear," says Seah McCammon, president and founder of Nanny Connection, a placement agency based in Denver. "So I often ask them to talk about the families they've worked for and listen for signs of a connection." A good sign is when nannies tear up discussing former clients; a bad sign is calling a former charge a brat. McCammon has seen it all—including gold diggers, the

Nanny Dos and Don'ts

Handing over your child to an outsider is an emotional challenge. Here are some tips from Denver nannies and their agencies on how to manage a healthy, professional relationship with your nanny.

Don't

- Pay cash. Use a paycheck service such as Nanny-checks to ensure proper taxes are withheld.
- Expect a nanny to clean your bathroom.
- Undermine the nanny's authority when she's gone.
- Use a nanny cam without notification.
- Ask a nanny when she plans to get a "real job."

Do

- Say "thank you."
- Outline your expectations in writing at the onset and schedule an annual review.
- Let the nanny take your children on outings.
- Expect to pay for sick days and two weeks of vacation. Many families also contribute to the nanny's health care costs.
- Prepare to share your children's affection.

nanny soul sisters of singletons looking for love that comes with a vacation home or luxury car. "I had a nanny apply for a job and immediately tell me she wanted to work for an affluent family," McCammon says. She declined to place her.

The matchmaking is two-sided; the agencies listen to families as well, often visiting the home before setting up interviews. Families love to say they're laid-back and flexible, and most claim their children are so easy to deal with that caring for them is hardly work. An in-home visit helps the nanny agency create a more realistic picture of the family situation and envision the employee who might fit the bill. Mostly, nanny agencies look to determine the family's parenting philosophies, and see how they match with their nanny pool. For example, parents determined to have a highly scheduled day might do better with a younger nanny who's not yet set in her routine. Other times parents specifically request a grandmotherly type

who'll bring years of childcare experience to their family.

And—right or wrong—appearances matter, as in the harsh world of dating. But with nannies there's a twist: Prettier does not always equal better. In the business, they call it "the hot nanny" issue.

"It's definitely a problem with some girls," says McCammon. "I had the best nanny; she was extremely attractive, and parents kept turning her down." The kibosh was usually short, curt, and from the mouths of mothers. McCammon would ask why the families turned the "hot" nanny down, and was often met with a simple "she's just not going to work out." Eventually a young Denver couple hired her.

Laurie Pensack, president of Premier Nannies and Rent a Mom Colorado, has seen it too, although she adds that mostly it seems like second wives are the ones wary of the cute girls. More often, Swift says, she sees the other side of the coin, saying it's sometimes harder to place her highly qualified but

overweight nannies. Pensack agrees. "Nannies are an extension of the family, and many people want presentable and sophisticated nannies who'll make a good impression," she explains. Nanny sightings could be poolside at the country club or on an overseas family vacation. Code for nixing the overweight candidates includes phrases such as, "I'm looking for someone more active" or "I was worried she wouldn't be able to keep up with my kids."

Whether the nanny hookup comes from an online ad, a setup from a friend, or a professional service, ultimately the parents need to feel a connection before committing to this relationship. For that first date—the nanny interview—the pros offer some tips. First, meet with the nanny in your home, with your children there. See how the nanny interacts with the kids—ultimately it's more important the nanny gets along with them than with you. Second, call references and listen for clues of a family bond from former parents. And finally, spend the money on extensive, state-by-state background checks. There are many firms online that will handle this task, or call a local law firm for referrals.

Come to think of it, maybe a few background checks would've come in handy out in the dating world too.

BY REBECCA LANDWEHR



Where To Start

Nannies are growing in popularity in Denver; local agencies advise starting your search six to eight weeks before your nanny's expected start date if you can afford to pay to hold the space.

- Hit your neighborhood playground (11 a.m. is usually a good time) and ask the best nanny you see if she knows anyone.
- Connect with a moms' group—either online or hobby-related. Whether you're into baby yoga, scrap booking, or Gymboree, find active moms and ask them to share their little black books.
- Check out nanny listings on Craigslist.org.

Internet-savvy nannies post new profiles daily, so you can compare many applicants without the legwork.

- Post a job listing within nursing schools or education departments at local universities. From University of Colorado at Denver to Red Rocks Community College, seek out the early childhood education departments.
- Ask other moms in kid-centric neighborhoods such as Highlands Ranch, Stapleton, or Lowry—anyplace where families can afford to pay a premium for childcare.
- Hire a nanny agency. For a fee these

professionals will screen applicants for you and conduct extensive background checks. Here are just a few, illustrating the range of fees:

ABC Nannies & Domestic Cost is a \$200 retainer and 10 percent of the nanny's annual salary for full-time nannies, 12 percent for live-in help. 303-321-3866.

Premier Nannies and **Rent a Mom of Colorado** Cost is \$1,900 for full-time nanny placement, \$1,500 for part-time. 303-322-1399.

Nanny Connection Cost is \$800 for full-time nanny placement, \$575 for part-time. 303-337-4772.

Mother's Little Helper

Finding quality daycare is a major expense for many Denver families, but this local mom found her money paid for more than just a babysitter.



“Welcome to Qualistar.”

For many Coloradans, that's the first thing they'll hear once they start looking for childcare. Dialing the statewide referral line (1-877-338-CARE) is the easiest way to get connected to licensed childcare providers in your area. Don't be concerned that the name lacks official-sounding titles like “Department of...” or “Colorado Division of...” Qualistar Early Learning is a private, nonprofit organization that's serving as an information clearinghouse for Colorado childcare. Formed by the merger of Educare Colorado (featured in *5280* Feb./March 2004) and the Colorado Office of Resources and Referral Agencies (CORRA), the group combines a ratings system with a referral source for parents and specialized materials for childcare providers.

Ultimately, Qualistar's mission is to improve quality and access to childcare in the state. The key is its rating system, a four-star scale compiled by professional assessors. The results are delivered in an Early Learning Report and can be read online at www.qualistar.org. The report's purpose is twofold: Parents get detailed information about a center, and the center receives specific action points on how to improve its quality rating. Although today only 394 of the roughly 3,000 childcare centers in Colorado have applied for ratings, Qualistar offers teaching tools and resources to centers committed to improving their quality of care. Centers must pay \$1,000 for the first classroom and \$750 for each additional room; financial aid is widely available.

Check out the website for a variety of childcare resource materials, and use its online search as a first step in investigating potential childcare centers.

LIKE MANY MOMS, I CRIED THE first time I dropped off my son Miles at daycare.

Sure, we'd been planning this since I was five months pregnant, when we found our daycare provider, Donna, through friends; we paid her a deposit before our son was born. But on that first morning of my new gig as a freelance writer, I struggled to start work in the curious silence of no-baby-at-home, forcing myself to wait at least two hours before calling to check on him.

As expected, our family adjusted. The change became routine and we grew to trust Donna, who watches Miles two or three days a week. I was also in for an amazing surprise. I learned from Donna—a mother and grandmother who's provided daycare in her Denver home for 13 years—and that's made me a better mom.

She knows all the little tricks, like giving a wiggly 6-month-old a toy while changing a diaper to keep him still. Or coring and peeling an apple for a teething

9-month-old. Even better, she has helped me relax and put things in perspective: It wasn't going to hurt Miles at 5 months that he drank more milk than doctors recommended, or that he didn't like rice cereal. And just because Miles' head was a bit oblong, flat in the back and, well, big (95th percentile), that didn't mean anything was wrong with him.

Was I neurotic? Maybe.

During my pregnancy and in the weeks after Miles was born, I read a lot about childcare—too much, if you ask my husband. In my defense, I don't think you can read too much, but sorting through loads of advice it's easy to lose touch with your instincts. Donna has helped me find my way back to common sense.

She's not one to say “you should.” That wouldn't fly with us. Donna makes suggestions when I say something is bothering me, and has so far—knock on wood—assured me what Miles does or doesn't do differently from other kids is “normal,” the best word a mom can hear.

Her role in my life is a mentor unlike any other. My mom and my mother-in-law are my most trusted sources, but they can't always help with the daily dilemmas. Let's face it: They raised their kids a while ago (as evidenced by the fact that I traveled by car in a padded laundry basket). And pediatricians see lots of kids, but they see my son for only

\$ How Much Will It Cost?

Costs vary in Denver, from \$800 to \$1,500 a month for full-time infant care. The current average bill is \$1,000 a month. As your children grow, the cost should decrease slightly.

a few minutes every couple of months. Who better than Donna, who spends most of her time with the same kids, to spot a baby's first ear infection or know a baby is crying for a nap, not a bottle?

I'm not the only one unexpectedly learning from my daycare provider. Regan Petersen of Denver worried when, at 11 months, her son Cole was still doing an Army crawl (stomach to the ground) instead of a cruising on all fours, like most babies his age. “Being a first-time mom, I was really concerned,” Petersen says. One of his teachers at Cowlicks daycare in Park Hill said Cole might go right to standing, then walking. Sure

enough, that's what happened. “Right when he started standing up, it was like, ‘Let's go!’” Petersen says.

Nancy McLaughlin of Boulder likes that her daycare, Our Child Care Center in Longmont, helps with stage transitions. This year she expects to start potty-training her son Liam, 2. “It's nice to know that there's somebody that probably potty-trained hundreds of kids and is going to be able to partner with me on this and give me advice and another opinion,” she says.

Donna has helped ease Miles into new stages and learn new things too. My son started using the sippy cup at her house, not ours.

As Miles approached his first

birthday, I realized the only life he knows includes time at the “playhouse,” as my husband calls Donna's home. When Miles sees Donna each morning, a shy smile creeps out from behind his pacifier before he beelines it to the toy closet. And I've realized that daycare can be more than just the place kids go when parents have to work. I can't imagine life without Donna's advice. She's helped me become a better mom.

I still cry once in awhile on my way back home from daycare, when I glimpse Miles' empty car seat in the rearview mirror. But I rarely worry and I'm able to work.

Now, about that pacifier...

BY KELLY PATE DWYER

Where To Start

For full-time care in metro Denver, local childcare centers suggest starting the search six months prior to the expected arrival of your child.

Daycare in Denver: A step-by-step guide

1) Call 1-877-338-CARE, the statewide childcare referral line operated by Qualistar, a nonprofit early childhood education organization. An automated attendant will ask for the county in which you'll need childcare. Your call will automatically be transferred to your local referral agency.

2) Expect to spend 10 minutes on the phone with a referral counselor. You'll be asked specific questions about your situation to narrow the search. This referral line is also equipped to help families whose children have special needs.

3) The counselor will run a geographic search for licensed facilities in your area. These are only referrals, not recommendations. The list will be sent by mail or, in some cases, e-mail.

4) Cross-reference the list with either Qualistar's ratings (online at www.qualistar.org) or with the National Association for the Education of Young Children, an accreditation agency for childcare centers and pre-schools (<http://naeyc.org>).

5) Narrow your list and visit at least five childcare centers—parents only.

6) Once you've found a potential center, call the Colorado Division of Childcare (303-866-5958) and request a licensing summary. (The initial information packet includes a tip sheet on how to read the government document.)

7) Visit your two favorite centers with your child. Notice how the staff interacts with him or her. When finalizing your decision, the experts say “trust your gut.”

One Size Doesn't Fit All

Not every family needs full-time childcare. How some Denver moms struggle to fill the gap.

AS FRUSTRATED AS SHE IS,

Linnea Krizsan knows it could be worse. Until recently she was a full-time, stay-at-home mom. Her husband, Peter Sherman, the principal at Park Hill Elementary School, had most of his summers off, and the two were able to scale back their lifestyle so Mom could afford to stay at home with son Ry from the start. Now that Ry's pushing 2 years old and Krizsan is easing back into the workforce, it seems the childcare dilemma was only temporarily delayed for this Park

Hill family. "We do have it pretty good," says Krizsan. "But finding childcare is my biggest challenge right now. I feel like it's taken over my life."

Why is Krizsan so frustrated? It seems she's caught in a calendar crunch: She's too early to line up part-time childcare for August, but she's late for signing up Ry for preschool classes when he turns 2 in December. (Preschool will be in addition to his two days of childcare.) This fall, as Krizsan gradually re-enters the workforce, she'll spend

two days a week (up from one day a week in 2004) at the Public Education Business Coalition in downtown Denver. She'd previously traded babysitting with a friend who also worked one day a week in the same office. The two moms simply alternated days between mom duty and office duty. But because of scheduling issues, that plan will no longer work this fall. So in January, Krizsan—thinking she was ahead of the game—tried setting up part-time childcare for August when she would return to work.

Her dream childcare would be a licensed in-home provider in the neighborhood who could take Ry two days a week—all this for less than \$10 an hour. The reality, she discovered, was in-home caretakers didn't plan that far ahead. Instead they take on new children only when a space opens up. And she found \$10 is probably at the low end of the pay scale.

To make matters worse, while the in-home daycare providers were telling Krizsan she was too early, the preschool programs were quoting months-long wait lists. Ry will turn 2 in December. It's an age when many stay-at-home moms want to expose their kids to other children in a learning environment: less a babysitter, more a development opportunity. But Krizsan found that for the coveted preschools June was simply too late. The waiting lists were already extending into the new year. So by the Fourth of July, Ry was wait-listed at one preschool and Krizsan was forced to wait it out and see where her son would end up—and when.

"I wish someone had told me to start looking for preschools when he was a year old," she says. "I just didn't even know I was late."

Although parents working two full-time jobs may be envious of moms like Krizsan, finding part-time childcare in Denver is still a hassle. For many families, the solution requires a combination of networking, creativity, and cash. The key to finding a solution is getting connected to other moms—any way possible. Moms talk, and they're often the first to know about great

\$ How Much Will It Cost?

Drop-in care varies throughout the region; expect to pay at least \$9 an hour.

Play Nicely and Learn To Share

Many families are discovering the practical beauty of nanny-sharing arrangements: hiring one nanny to look after two to three children from different families. Just be sure both families involved have similar parenting styles and have decided on the ground rules ahead of time. Expect to pay the high end of the nanny pay scale, divided between parents.

Before agreeing to share a nanny, parents should determine:

- If the children get along well with each other.
- Where the kids will spend their time.
- The children's sleep/feeding schedules.
- What are acceptable outings for all the kids.

babysitters, availability at local childcare providers, and new centers that don't have waiting lists. And sometimes other moms will even watch your kids for free. If you don't have a mom network, find one. Follow your interests—Krizsan met mom friends at an infant music class in her neighborhood. Other moms swear by their postpartum workout groups, or even web-based support groups they've discovered online. "Having a baby is a life-altering experience, and it's really important to find other women to talk to," says Krizsan. Moms can commiserate, trade advice, and eventually help each other with word-of-mouth childcare options.

Once moms get connected, creative solutions start flowing. One Denver neighborhood created a childcare network among stay-at-home moms, where members traded wooden nickels to other moms for free

babysitting. In the Lowry neighborhood, a now-defunct group used popsicle sticks as currency. Moms started with a number of sticks and traded them to other moms for free babysitting. Drop your kid off and pay with popsicle sticks. Out of sticks? It's time to volunteer to watch someone else's kid for a change. Krizsan has heard of groups like this and thinks it's a good idea: The babysitting currency brings an air of accountability to the trade-offs. "Because sometimes you need to have an hour to get a haircut and you don't want your friends to think you're taking advantage of them for free babysitting," says Krizsan. The Lowry group ultimately put itself out of business because the moms became comfortable with their neighbors and no longer needed the sticks to keep things fair and square.

Other moms rely on nanny-sharing arrangements where

one nanny watches two to three children and the families split the hourly cost (between \$12 and \$15 an hour). Krizsan noticed neighborhood friends who've linked themselves to a tight network of experienced, grandmotherly nannies. "They're awesome," says Krizsan. "I'm at the park a lot and you'll see some nannies on their cell phones, but these women are incredible. They interact with the kids, and you can see the love." And luckily for the Park Hill moms in the know, these experienced nannies are all friends and willing to refer jobs to each other.

One frustrated working mom solved her childcare problems with a business plan. Marie Hueston, mother of two and a former US West executive, recently opened Family Flex, a childcare center in the Golden Triangle. "I went through this myself with my kids and saw there was a huge market for quality childcare that met the needs of professionals," says Hueston. Family Flex, which opened last spring, operates seven days a week from 7 a.m. till 11 p.m. (Nights and weekends require reservations.) At Family Flex, parents can either enroll their children for full-time care (with a \$100 fee) or pay a \$20 fee and have drop-in privileges while paying an hourly rate. (Drop-ins must still be scheduled ahead of time.) The facility is impressive: big and clean with lots of creative

games and seemingly attentive staff. Offering low child-to-staff ratios and a solid curriculum, Family Flex will even feed the kids dinner (for an extra \$5) if parents are held up past 6 o'clock at the office. "We understand parents' schedules, and we're staffed to meet the needs of parents who work full-time or those parents who only need us two hours a week," says Hueston. Of course it comes at a cost: Full-time care at Family Flex runs \$1,300 a month for infants, and the hourly rate for drop-in care is \$9 on nights and weekends for infants and toddlers; that's after the initial enrollment fee.

As for Krizsan, she finally found childcare for her return to the workforce this fall. Ry will spend two days a week at an in-home center in the Whittier neighborhood. She found the provider through a connection at her husband's school. But it looks like Ry might not make it into his chosen preschool until next spring—possibly even in the fall of 2006. Until then, he'll spend his time with his new daycare provider, Barbara. "She gave me tons of forms to fill out—health forms, emergency forms, which made me feel safer somehow, given that no one else had mentioned forms," says Krizsan. "Ry's first day is on Thursday, and I've already started the sleepless nights full of worries and what-ifs."

BY REBECCA LANDWEHR

Where To Start

How to Visit a Childcare Provider

We asked Denver providers for tips on how to observe childcare centers on the all-important scouting visits.

- Plan to stay for 90 minutes. Teachers can present a "good face" for shorter visits, but the longer you stay the more realistic picture you'll get.
- Look for a posted schedule of the day's activities.
- Avoid nap-time visits; it's important to see how the center runs when the children are awake.

- Observe indoor activities and outdoor activity time. How do the teachers interact with the children outside? Are they involved with and talking to the kids, or sitting on a bench?
- Notice how teachers deal with interrupting children. Look for teachers who acknowledge the children and ask them to wait until their turn. Ignoring the child who interrupts is a bad sign.
- See how the teachers manage chaos. Look for teachers who don't turn on the children or their coworkers in

tough situations.

- Interact with the teachers. You'll want good communication with the people spending all day with your child. Look for teachers who are comfortable chatting with parents.
- Ask about their philosophies on how they hold and communicate with babies.
- Be sure to inquire about toilet-training techniques.
- Ask the teachers, "How do you like your job?" It's a surprising question, and the responses will be telling.

