

STYLE

Confessions of a nanny screener

Don't let 'The Nanny Diaries' happen to you

By Jenny Miller

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In the movie version of the chick-lit hit "The Nanny Diaries," which comes out Friday, protagonist Annie Braddock takes a nannying job with the unsavory Xs, a wealthy New York family whose demands escalate in the realm of the outrageous. Of course, this story is an exaggeration — or is it? To find out, we quizzed Wendy Lipe, a placement specialist at local agency Nannies From the Heart, who was herself a nanny back in her college days.

Austin American-Statesman: Did you read 'The Nanny Diaries' or do you plan to see the movie?

Wendy Lipe: I've read the book. It's good chick lit. For the movie, we had talked about having a nanny night out and doing dinner and the movie.

How do you protect nannies from families like the Xs?

There just aren't a lot of families like that in this area. Although there was one before I came on board. Rebecca (D'Amico, founder of Nannies From the Heart) had told me about one family she had met with and politely declined because she didn't think it would be a safe environment for the nanny. When families are looking for a permanent nanny, we actually go to their home and meet with them.

How do you protect families from sub-par nannies?

We don't let the bad apples get through the cracks. We have them fingerprinted. If they're going to be driving on the job, we get a driving record. Also, all of our nannies are first aid- and CPR-certified. But I think the most important thing we do is checking references.

Do you consider personalities when making a match?

Absolutely. And the little details — if everything's pristine and immaculate with white carpeting, we know a laid-back nanny who might get the kids into finger-painting wouldn't be the best fit for them. If they have a swimming pool and a boat stored in the garage, we know they like to be outside and active.

So we want a younger, more active nanny.

What are reasonable and unreasonable requests of a nanny?

We always tell families that a nanny is not a maid. Sometimes someone wants somebody to come in and give their children their undivided attention and also scrub toilets and cook elaborate meals and do the laundry. We say that's an unreasonable request because one person cannot do all that in one day. You've got to know the line between a nanny and a housekeeper.

In 'The Nanny Diaries,' Annie becomes enraged when she's being taped by a hidden "nanny cam." What are your thoughts about this practice?

We tell families, if you want to have a nanny cam, out of respect for your nanny at least tell them about it. Some families will have a Webcam set up in the playroom so they can see from work what their child is doing. I think nannies are creeped out about being watched without knowing it. It's not that they have anything to hide — but they want to know that they're trusted and if you're sneaking cameras, that's not a good way to earn trust.

There's been a lot of recent buzz about nanny sharing. Does your agency facilitate that?

Sometimes — not a lot. But sometimes two families will come to us and say, OK — we're ready to share a nanny. They each pay an application fee but then they split the placement fee.

What do you make of all the fuss over nanny-sharing, nanny-swiping, "mannies" (male nannies), "Supernanny," etc.? How do you explain the fascination with all things nanny?

Children are the most important part of our lives as parents. So if we're not the ones providing care for them all the time, the next best option is a nanny; I think families are starting to see that. And with a nanny-share, it can be affordable. I think it's also our fascination with stars. We're reading about Britney Spears having a nanny. It used to be such an elite thing — only movie stars or people like Michael Dell had them. But now my next-door neighbor has a nanny.

Nanny 411

Nannies From The Heart is a full-service nanny placement agency founded in Austin in 1998. It sets up families with full- and part-time nannies, babysitters, mother's helpers and personal assistants. For information, call 302-1998 or visit www.nanniesfromtheheart.com.

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