



ERIC SCHRAMM/DEER VALLEY RESORT

Planning a fun family vacation? Don't forget some baby-sitting

By **Kari Bodnarchuk**
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Sometimes mom and dad need a timeout, even on a family vacation. Maybe you want a date night, or a chance to play a round of golf together, actually ski side by side, or simply share an uninterrupted meal. Baby sitters abound wherever you go, but finding a responsible, trustworthy caretaker or day-care center can take some work before you leave home.

"Leaving your kid with a stranger can be one of the most nerve-racking experiences of parenthood," says Sarah Christensen, who started Park City Sitters, in Park City, Utah, after relying on a similar child-care service during a trip to Idaho. "I

realized how uncomfortable it is for parents to leave their own kids with people they

Climbing wall at Deer Valley Children's Center in Park City, Utah; gym at Kids Quest in Las Vegas; Moe Morrell in the Deer Valley Infant Room with the author's daughter, Grace; and Bradley Snyder, 18 months, at Little Adventures Children's Center at Canyons Resort in Park City.

don't know."

Get creative when you start searching. Call ahead to your hotel for recommendations, contact local day-care centers, spread the

word among your friends and hometown caretakers, and get online.

Waltham-based Care.com has a database with hundreds of thousands of providers across the country who offer child care and pet-minding services. If you are going to Miami, for instance, find someone there to watch your children so you can have a night out, and also hire someone at home to feed your beloved pet while you are away. You can even arrange for a caretaker to check on your elderly parents.

Search Care.com's listings by region — you can refine your search by selecting age and price range, gender, and languages spoken, for

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KIDS QUEST (TOP); KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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instance — and then reach out to anyone whose profile and qualifications you like. Or post your own specific request and vet those who respond.

Katie Bugbee, managing editor at Care.com, recommends getting as detailed as possible: “You want to say, ‘Here’s when we’ll be in town and what we need. We are looking for a baby sitter who is at least 17 years old. You must be familiar with the challenges of watching an overexcited 4-year-old and be able to deal with a colicky newborn.’”

Once you have narrowed it down to several people, adds Bugbee, do a phone interview, then Skype so you can “meet” face to face, run a background check, and get references.

“Don’t just call the people they give you,” says Bugbee. “Ask for the name of a high school coach, a university teacher, or their last boss, and get a sense of their maturity level and their ability to handle emergencies and challenging situations.”

Not sure how much to pay your sitter? Care.com has a calculator that lets you find the average local rate at your destination.

We have used child-care centers at resorts, community day-care centers, and local baby sitters when we have traveled, and once left our 9-month-old daughter at the drop-in facility at a local gym, The Kids Cabin in Park City’s Silver Mountain Sports Club. This state-licensed hourly child-care facility caters to residents, but welcomes out-of-towners and charged less than some of our other options. YMCAs will sometimes let you use drop-in care if you are a member back home, but make these arrange-



KIDS QUEST

Kids Quest has facilities in about 20 casinos nationwide. Most feature indoor playgrounds, game rooms, and karaoke stages.

ments in advance.

Ski resorts offer some of the best day-care programs for travelers. Deer Valley Ski Resort in Park City, for instance, has a palatial center with dedicated areas for each age group. In the quiet, tucked-away infant room, Moe Morrell (known as “Grandma” to many visitors and resident children) and her nurturing colleagues pamper and play with babies ages 2 to 11 months. Meanwhile, the 4-year-olds might be working on arts and crafts projects, performing in a mini playhouse, driving toy cars around a massive indoor jungle gym, scaling a climbing wall, or suiting up for their 2-hour semi-private ski lesson. Older children, up to 12, participate in full-day organized ski programs, complete with lunch and hot chocolate breaks.

Remember to mark your

child’s name on everything you leave at the day-care center: toys, sippy cups, bottles, bags (attach a luggage tag), and clothing. We left several cherished toys behind at one center before we understood the importance of labeling.

If you stay at a hotel, don’t just ask the concierge staff what babysitting services they recommend, ask where they take their children. On a trip to Las Vegas, I could hire an in-room baby sitter recommended by the hotel for \$45 an hour with a four-hour minimum — a perfectly good service, but with a price tag beyond my reach — or I could take my 7-month-old son to a day-care center about a \$16 taxi ride away (where the concierge leaves his children), and pay \$8 to \$9.50 an hour for secure, dependable care. That facility, called Kids Quest, was located inside the off-strip Palms Casino Resort.

If you go . . .

Tips

- Read registration forms carefully. Many include a stipulation that you allow your child’s name and photograph to be used for public relations, publicity, editorial, and advertising purposes. It’s OK to cross out this section, but make sure you let the staff know.
- Fill out registration forms in advance in order to make the check-in and “goodbye” process go as quickly and smoothly as possible.
- Pay attention to local laws.

In Nevada, for instance, you must provide your child’s immunization records when you first drop your child off.

■ Ask about caretaker-child ratios. These generally run about 1:3 or 1:4 for children 1 to 2 years old, and 1:7 to 1:10 for 3 and older.

■ Ask about safety and security procedures. At Kids Quest, for instance, each child and parent receives a barcode; these barcodes must match in order for a parent to leave with a child.

Kids Quest runs hourly child-care facilities in about 20 casinos nationwide from Mohegan Sun Casino in Connecticut to Red Hawk Casino in California for children 6 weeks to 12 years old. You soon realize why they are referred to as “entertainment centers”: Most have a colorful indoor playground, iPad stations, a techno games room, a karaoke stage, a play area for “dramatic” performances, arts and crafts areas, and organized games and events. A few even have a rock ‘n’ roll music room and dance floors.

Stop in to see the child-care facility when you arrive in town to make sure it lives up to your expectations. Is it clean enough? Is there a good variety of toys and activities? Does anyone look bored and ignored? And was the space designed with children in mind? In the Deer Valley Children’s Center, all the potties and sinks in the bathroom are kid-size and at kid level.

We toured Kids Clubhouse in Park City before leaving our daughter there. We were impressed with the organized activities, the layout, and the cleanliness of the facility, and the huge windows along one wall that let sunlight spill in.

“The kids love sitting on the window seats and watching people go by,” says owner Lisa D’Agostino-Silverstein. “One day, Santa walked by and all the kids looked, but no one reacted at all. Then Elmo walked by and they flipped out.”

Consider hiring a local baby sitter who will come to your hotel room. In Park City, we hired an in-room baby sitter through Guardian Angels, a service that provides child care and gear such as cribs, car seats, strollers, and other equipment. We used a similar service at Lake Tahoe. Just beware of extra fees and expenses. Many have a three- or four-hour minimum, and some

charge extra for infants. You may also need to cover your sitter’s parking costs, meals, and travel fees. Make sure you figure out these details in advance.

Also ask if the tip is included in the rate, and what the options are for paying, recommends Cheryl Melnick of Northern California, who traveled with her family to San Diego on a business trip.

“We didn’t know we had to pay the sitter in cash until the last day, since the contract didn’t specify that information,” Melnick says.

Not all sitters have to come from agencies. Gayle and Everett Potter brought their daughter Emma, then 21 months old, on a trans-Atlantic crossing from New York to Southampton, England, aboard Cunard’s Queen Mary 2.

“Emma spent time in the child center with British nannies and cool English toys,” says Gayle. “But when we did our fire drill before we left New York Harbor, we met the nicest Australian woman who worked at the spa. She was winking at Emma and making her laugh. Later, I went to the spa and asked her if she would baby-sit. She was thrilled and became our baby sitter for the trip.”

If none of this works for you, consider bringing a baby sitter with you. I have brought sitters, empty-nester friends, or Grandma with me on business trips from New Mexico to New Zealand. Often it was cheaper than hiring someone at our destination, and it meant I also had help in the airport and on flights.

With adequate preparation, your time away can be both a couple’s and a family vacation.

Kari Bodnarchuk can be reached at travelwriter@karib.us.