**Calling All Babysitters**

Shortage Has Parents Trying Every Name --and Trick - -in the Book

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They're in short supply. They're hard to find. And Mark McFadden knows he's got to be fast and ruthless if he's going to snag one. A cocktail party invitation means a race to the phone to book one before his neighbors do. Early November means it's time to lock them in for those Christmas parties. And he's always on the prowl for naive parents who will give up the goods and reveal the ones they use --something he never does. You've got to do whatever it takes, McFadden will tell you, to find and keep that babysitter. "If it's someone really reliable, I'm not going to give their name out to someone else," he said. "When we all work so hard, we want to play hard once in a while. You can't play if you can't find adequate coverage for your kids."

The Washington area is struggling with a shortage of teenage baby-sitters, and parents say they just stay home many nights because they can't find one. Among the reasons: A decline in the population of older teenagers has come just as a baby boomlet has-yielded more children who need, watching. And parents say teenagers are busier now with after-school activities. Girls, for example, have more opportunities to play organized sports.

Although it seemed that practically every block had eager child-minding girls in decades past, parents now say they hoard phone numbers of their best sitters and keep them even from their friends. They book sitters sometimes months in advance and practically bribe them with food and other perks. It's a seller's market, with prices hitting $7.50 to $10 an hour in some neighborhoods.

John McFadden, of Alexandria, entices teenagers to look after his 7- and 9-year-old sons by trying to make the job sound like a mini-vacation. He'll tell them that he's got a Blockbuster movie and that all they have to do is watch it with the children. You want to surf the Net? No problem. Still, about 15 times a year, he and his wife come up empty and have to cancel plans. "You've got to make it really attractive for the babysitter ," McFadden said. "It's a competition to get them. These kids have a lot of choices."

Busy professionals even have been rearranging work schedules around their sitters' plans. Jean McGillen, the executive director of a group that fixes up apartment buildings for low- and moderate-income people in Arlington, frequently has difficulty finding someone to watch the children so she can attend evening meetings with her board of directors. Her solution: first find out when her sitter is free, then call her board to change the meeting to that night.

Demographic change explains part of the scramble, says Harold Hodgkinson, director of the Center for Demographic Policy in Washington. Low birth numbers in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s mean there are relatively fewer older teenagers. Couple that with a large number of children from a recent birth urge and the result is an increased baby-sitting demand and a decreased supply. In 1980, there were 33 million people younger than 10, while those ages 15 to 19 --prime baby-sitting ages --numbered 21 million.. By 1996, the population younger than 10 had climbed to 38 million, while the number of older teenagers had dropped to 18.6 million, according to U.S. Census data.

In addition, parents and others involved with babysitters throughout the area say teenage girls start baby-sitting sooner and quit much earlier than in past generations. High school students now cram in more activities after school and have more job alternatives, meaning there's less time for a teenager to baby-sit.

Joanne Steller, of Chevy Chase, says that's the case for Katie, her 13-year-old daughter, who plays soccer, swims and takes piano lessons. This summer, Katie baby-sat almost every weekend and could have "baby-sat every day of her life" if she took all the offers that came her way. But Steller is going to have Katie scale back her child-watching duties.

"More kids do sports, and if you've got a kid involved in soccer with practices two to three times week, that makes them unavailable for baby-sitting," said Steller, who baby-sat all through high school in the 1960s, "When I was in school, girls were not involved in sports. If you have an athletic daughter, you want them to take advantage of the increased opportunities.

One bright spot is that some boys have joined the pool of babysitters. But they, too, have scheduling problems because of sports and after-school jobs. And in any case, many parents prefer to hire girls. Because baby-sitting is such a localized enterprise, the overall shortage hasn't hit all neighborhoods equally. Some tight knit communities with lots of teenagers haven't felt the pinch. But the problem is at its worst in many town house communities where young parents and small children dominate.

The crunch has prompted schools and other institutions to adapt. Patrick Henry Elementary School in Arlington began offering baby-sitting several years ago at parent-teacher association meetings and other evening events for adults because parents were showing up with children and complaining that they couldn't find anyone to mind them.

The Birchmere music club in Alexandria has moved show times progressively earlier in the last few years, from 9 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Michael Jaworek, the club's promoter, figures parents will have an easier time finding sitters if they're getting home earlier from a show. Patricia Keener, a pediatrician in Indianapolis who founded a nationwide training program for babysitters in 1980, remembers when it wasn't like that. "It used to be that the mother would call up the day she wanted a sitter, and the sitter came over," Keener said. "Now, there are all these elaborate plans. ...And pity the poor mother who doesn't have a sitter by Wednesday for a Friday." Her nonprofit program, Safe Sitter, offers classes at Washington area hospitals from Leesburg to Bethesda.

For some families, finding a sitter is complicated further because parents are getting pickier. And in today's more mobile society, parents say they worry that they don't know the local teenagers well enough. Kathy Hedrick, who lives in western Prince William County, hires a day-care worker who looks after her 2- and 5-year-old daughters to baby-sit on evenings and weekends --something her day-care center says has become common. When she heard that a teenager in her neighborhood looked after children, she couldn't bring herself to leave her children with her. She said she would have worried too much.

All that means the relatively few experienced teenagers who baby-sit are hot commodities. Kerry Ross, 16, of Arlington, says for every Friday and Saturday night, she has 10 to 15 parents pleading with her to come over. If parents want to ensure a spot on her calendar, they need to reserve her three to four weeks in advance, especially for big local events such as back-to-school nights.

I work on a first-come, first-served basis. I don't double-book, said the seasoned business operator, who tells parents they can try her on short notice --in case she gets a cancellation. Regularly rejecting adults can be hard, she says. It's very uncomfortable sometimes. You feel downright bad telling them that you are already booked. Amber Earp, 16, of Woodbridge, gets really busy in the fall and winter. That's when all the military families in her neighborhood start heading out to the Army Ball and other holiday parties. A client once asked her in September to baby-sit on New Year's Eve. And one day after Christmas last year, she did four baby-sitting jobs, a day that started at 7 a.m. and ended at 1 a.m.

The fortunate parents who are able to land a sitter also have been hit with sticker shock. Forget the days when you could find one for 50 cents an hour and expect them to clean the house. Today's teenagers routinely charge $5 to $7 an hour and expect to be fed. In more affluent areas such as Bethesda and Alexandria, some parents are paying $7.50 to $10 an hour, and they say it's still hard to get sitter? The reason: They don't really need the money .David Gordon says that in moments of desperation he's -called 15-year-olds who usually charge $6 an hour and offered more. Overall, it has been a very sticky situation.

**Reading Questions**

1. What is responsible for the shortage of babysitters in Washington, DC? Identify the parts of the article which indicate a decrease in supply and an increase in demand.
2. What happens to the market price of babysitters when supply decreases? What happens to quantity of babysitters demanded? What happens to the market price of babysitters when demand increases? What happens to quantity of babysitters supplied?
3. What happens when both supply decreases and demand increases (with an inadequate increase in price?)
4. How can the shortage of babysitters be alleviated? List some ways to reduce the demand for babysitting. List ways to increase the supply of babysitters. How can a price change work to reduce the shortage?
5. Read the following excerpt from the Washington Post article:
6. David Gordon, who lives in upper Northwest Washington, says that in moments of desperation he's called 15-year-olds who usually charge $6 an hour and offered more... "They'll say, 'I don't know, I have a lot of homework,'" said Gordon, who then will offer $8 an hour. "Finally they'll say, 'Oh all right,' as if they're doing you a favor." Why can the babysitter get away with doing this?

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| * Price | $10 | $7 | $5 | $2 |
| * Quantity of babysitting hours supplied | 25 | 20 | 10 | 5 |

1. Look at the supply schedule below for Linda, who provides a babysitting service and answer the questions below.
2. What happened to the quantity of babysitting hours supplied as the price decreased?
3. What happened to the quantity of babysitting hours supplied as the price increased?
4. Why is Linda willing to babysit more hours when the price increases?
5. If she received $12.50 per hour for babysitting, do you suppose she would rather watch television or babysit after school?
6. If she received $1.00 per hour, do you think she would rather babysit or watch television?
7. What is responsible for the decreased supply of babysitters in Washington, DC?