

A Brief Report on College Student Nannies

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a small study on the phenomena of college student nannies. The authors report a wide variety of practices and issues related training, liability tax law, student scholarships, and safety, many of which are legally troubling.

### A Brief Report on College Student Nannies

The phenomenon of “nannyng” has become well known in recent years, in part due to the book and subsequent movie “The Nanny Diaries.” The phenomenon, begat by the rise in dual careers couples raising families, features a type of professional child care worker, or babysitter, who cares for children, usually during their parents’ working hours, particularly during summer school vacations. Such positions are filled by a variety of persons, ranging from students to grandmothers. The particular profile of nanny discussed here is the college student nanny, persons who care for others’ children while attending colleges and universities. Indeed, this market has become so big that Joe Keeley and Peter Lytle, President and Chairman of 3College Nannies and Tutors, Inc, grossed \$965,000 and employed 60 part-time nannies for their business in 2005. Keeley started the business in 2001, recruiting student nannies from St. Thomas University in St. Paul, Minnesota ([www.startribune.com](http://www.startribune.com)<<http://www.startribune.com>>, March 7, 2006).

This paper considers the phenomenon of nannies and nannyng in Seattle, Washington, where each of the authors teaches at a small university located in a relatively upscale neighborhood of the city. Over the years we have learned, through various discussions with our students that a significant number of them earned significant amounts of their yearly income by what is widely referred to as “nannyng.” Indeed, through subsequent web research we found that there is considerable demand for nannies in the Seattle area. “Craigslis” featured over 200 postings under “nannies” in the Seattle area listings between December 7-13, 2007. Moreover, we found that that our particular university was virtually regarded as a brand name in the Seattle market. The University student employment website was listed in “gocitykids.com” as a source under the category of “Nannies/Au Pairs.” Similar recommendations were found under the college category of “43things,” under “caregivers” and “baby sitters” at “Careerjet.com” and in

“Judysbook.com,” where the University website is listed as an “excellent source for sitters.” Some parents' advertisements for nannies require specific training, such as several courses in early childhood development, classes normally taken by students majoring either in psychology or education. So far as we have been able to determine, nannies are not expected to use their educations to create learning environments or to teach children specific skills such as reading, music, or mathematics.

In order to gain data for this study the authors solicited student volunteers from undergraduate classes to participate in three focus group discussions held in November, 2007-February 2009. Each group consisted of 5-8 students. The total number of students involved in the study was 18. The Groups were asked five general questions: Why do you nanny? What is it like to nanny? What are some especially good experiences? What are some especially bad experiences? What concerns do you have about nannying? How do you get a nannying job? Are there worrisome issues about nannying? Each individual in the group responded to the questions, often commenting on or expanding upon each other's remarks.

Money and flexibility of schedule seem to be prime motivators for our groups of students. The pay is regarded as good, better than minimum wage and, for many of our discussants, neither taxed nor reported on income tax returns. Schedules are flexible and can often be fit around student class schedules. Most students reported that they enjoyed being with the children, often outside, and liked be out of the dormitories and into a real house. Several students said the work was “fun” and they often looked at it as doing people a favor. One participant remarked that it was something that does not require very much training.

When asked what it is like to nanny, one participant quickly responded “Hell.” She felt families were too permissive and set few boundaries for their children. Much time is spent on

conflict mediation. One expressed her feeling that the job was “fun, but stressful.” Others reported feeling stressed when caring for 2 or 3 children. Caring for multiple toddlers was seen as particularly stressful. The same participant felt that parents were extraordinarily trusting in placing infants in the care of a college student. Though conceding that there are stressors, other respondents focused on many positives: playing Mom for day, hanging out with kids, playing with Legos, and facilitating artwork. Some participants found the families to be very supportive. Sometimes students care for children from multiple families (reported as both good and bad experiences), while another reports having to care for 6 children from two families.

Positive experiences were being paid to “do what I like,” carrying babies on walks in chest carriers, relationships with the parents and children. Children often view their nannies as big sisters. Students feel loved and needed. Working in homes is relaxing to some. They get to cook in a home kitchen and eat “real food.” One participant reported that it was rewarding to have such trust placed with her. Students enjoy playing with children, especially in the summer when activities can be taken outside.

Bad experiences abound. Common issues mentioned were: potty training, vomiting, cleaning up messes, and tantrums. Many participants indicated that they are expected to do housework and laundry. One participant indicated frustration with a parent who overrode most of her decisions when she came home. Another found it frustrating to care for children while the parent stayed at home to work. One student reported that he often felt inadequate to perform the job, while another felt parents have unrealistic expectations of what a nanny should do. Several students reported that their families have not seemed to have set any boundaries for the children; it was difficult to set limits when the parents had not set any. The nannies felt they could not go beyond the values of the parents, and in some cases their values diverged widely from the

parents'. Other issues involved non-payment (most students work without a contract, or written agreement), sexual harassment from a construction worker employed at the site, and feeling awkward when parents were smoking pot around their infant child.

Concerns expressed by the participants involved the responsibility for caring for other people's children, worries over medical emergencies, crazy parents, and driving with the children in automobiles. Some children have special needs, such as autism, ADHD, and seizures. The nannies felt unprepared for dealing with such situations. Nannies were often asked to drive children in their own cars or to use parents' cars without any specific information about insurance coverage.

At the conclusion of the discussion the researchers asked particular questions that came to mind during the discussion. How many had taken child care classes? (less than half) How many had taken courses in first aid? (most) None have state licenses. Only one reported her nanny income on her FAFSA (because it was paid directly into her checking account). None have written contracts and none have insurance.

Work hours and salary varied. Students worked from 15-30 hours per week, as early as 8 am and as late as 11:30 pm. Several students reported making over \$10,000 per year. The range was from \$3,000-11,000.

The researchers provided the student nannies with information about websites concerning nanny work, first aid classes, state licensing rules for group homes (defined as any home where children of more than one family are given care), insurance, tax rules, and possible implications of being caught for failing to report nanny income on financial aid applications. The State of Washington has recently divided its health agency and created a special agency to deal with children's concerns. That new agency is looking into the nanny business, but the agency did not

respond to our questions or to our report. We also notified our university that it should determine whether the university itself might incur a liability because many of the nanny jobs were listed on the university's own job website, which is open to submissions from anyone in the community.

Our sample size of 18 students was too small to warrant any statistical analysis. Anecdotally, we can report that while few students volunteered to be part of this study, which was approved by our university's Human Subjects Review Committee, when we asked large classes how many students did nanny work, in some cases almost every female and many males in the room raised their hands. When asked how many reported this income, typically only one or two students raised their hands.

Several of our colleagues, on hearing about this research, expressed concern that holding nanny jobs, rather than professional internships, might direct female students toward stereotypical female roles. Since some female students still talk about the BA as a stepping stone to the "MRS degree," we listened carefully for any indications that students' career ideas were changed by nanny work. Students did not discuss how nanny work might affect their self images or career choices. In fact, some students stated that these child care experiences would make them think twice about child bearing because of the intensity of the work but also because of the conflicts between careers and parenting that they had seen in the two-career families they typically serve.

This preliminary report identifies several interrelated issues surrounding this phenomenon as well as several areas for research and education. First, there seems to be an overall lack of professionalism involved at every stage of the activity. Although often advertised in euphemistic terms, nanny jobs are viewed primarily as baby sitting roles rather than as teaching

and modeling opportunities. Both employers and the employees appear to define the jobs as more than they actually are. Since the jobs lack definition of duties and responsibilities, there are many disappointments and disagreements among the parties involved. There is a crying need for student nannies to be trained in child care and first aid classes, state laws regulating child care, insurance and liability issues, and many financial and tax issues. The scenarios described by our participants show the nannies to be legally vulnerable to legal actions on several fronts.

Likewise, one wonders whether the parents would provide the nannies with so much responsibility if they were fully aware of potential dangers involved in hiring untrained workers. Finally, it would seem appropriate for both governmental agencies and universities themselves to explore both the legal and educational issues raised by the nanny business. The need for professional child care workers is not going away. The salaries are good. There is every opportunity for nanny work to be defined as an important educational role. At the same time, the public would be far safer if there were well understood rules and contracts that served to protect all parties, especially the children. Accordingly, one would hope that the complexities of this issue could be better understood.