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offspring

THE MAGAZINE OF

SMART PARENTING

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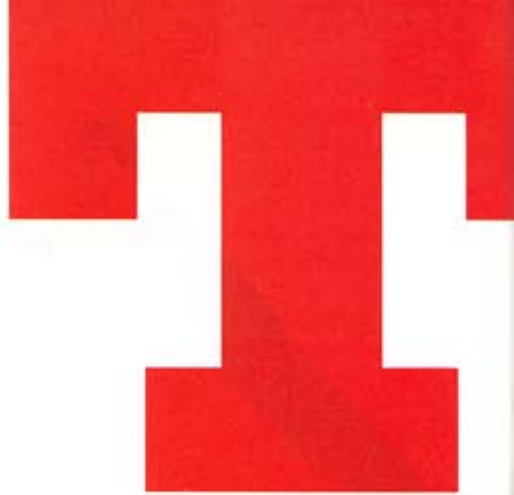
**WHO
MUST
BE
OBEYED**

You hired the nanny, so you're her boss, right? Ha! These days, desperate working parents will do *anything* to hold on to their caregiver.

YOU FINALLY found her. It was a bit of a hassle with all the searching and interviews and agency fees, but now she's entered your house—and your life—and suddenly, the clouds have lifted. Within hours, she's hugging your kids. Wait, they're hugging her back. Life feels normal again. You can go to work with a clear head and sit through meetings without panicked interruptions ("Mom, it's an *emergency!* Misty the cat is missing"). She has it all under control—no more

missed soccer practices, no more double-booked play dates you forgot to write down. Everyone's school lunch is made, and their homework done. This nanny is competent. Devoted. The parent you'd like to be if you weren't at the office all day. And soon you'll find yourself doing just about anything to keep her—anything.

She needs a new car and wants to send her daughter to private school? Why not? That's what one Bronxville, New York, couple did for their nanny, paying her seven-year-old's \$4,000-a-year



tuition and giving her a new Audi station wagon (sticker price; \$40,000) for shuttling the kids around. She's never been to Hawaii? Take her along on your vacation to Kauai, and put her up in a private ocean-view room (while you share with the kids, damp swimsuits hanging from every doorknob). That's what Midwestern mom Dianna Kesner recently did, throwing in a resort credit card that her caregiver used to charge meals, a haircut and souvenirs. She shares your taste in fancy consumer goods? Bring her a Prada

bag from Italy—costing upwards of \$250—and match it the same year with a Prada wallet for Christmas, like one Westchester County, New York, family, who also threw in a Kate Spade bag for their nanny's birthday.

All that, of course, comes on top of salaries and benefits that parents of an earlier generation might find staggering. These days, the average weekly salary for an experienced or "professional" nanny can run as high as \$500 a week for a live-in—and \$600 for a live-out. And let's not forget benefits.

The days when two weeks' paid vacation were considered a generous perk are long gone. Today's nannies want health insurance, retirement plans, personal phone lines and private bathrooms. "Amenities matter," explains Kathleen Finch, a Darien, Connecticut, mother of three and vice president of programming for the Food Network. "I'll tell a prospective nanny on the phone that I'll buy them a gym membership, sign them up to use our country club and have a third car at their disposal. They're also welcome to come on vacations if they'd like." Linda Sasser, a mother of three in Austin, Texas, and an owner with her husband of an employment agency, gave her nanny not only health insurance but also dental coverage and a 401(k) plan. "The more secure Cristal makes me feel as a mother, the more I can do for the business," Sasser explains. And the Minneapolis family that hired Becky Kavanagh puts \$100 a month into an annuity plan that Becky can access once she turns 55.

"It's a nanny's market out there," says Joy Wayne, director of Nannies Plus, a placement agency in Morris Plains, New Jersey. "There's a much greater supply of families looking than of good nannies." And most nannies know it. On a typical day, Wayne works on placing a nanny who is in her mid-twenties, who has a college degree and whose résumé includes several years of child care experience and volunteer work with children. One of her current prospects is looking to take home \$600 a week—which means \$750 out of the employer's pocket, including taxes—and three families have already expressed serious interest.

The driving force behind nanny inflation is clear: desperation. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, among all married



the nightmare is that **Mary Poppins** will vanish up the chimney just as mysteriously as she dropped down it.

couples, the percentage of dual-earner families has risen from 39 percent in 1970 to 61 percent in 1993. And a study conducted by the Families and Work Institute found that in three-quarters of dual-income families, both mom and dad work full time. Which means somebody else is watching the kids. For those families especially, nannies have become the child care choice. "A typical day care program can't meet the extent of the [working] parents' needs," says Abby Shapiro Kendrick, a senior consultant with WFD, a human resources consulting firm near Boston. "Many parents work long days, have last-minute deadlines and go away on business." So for parents seeking both flexibility and peace of mind, nannies are the solution.

But flexibility and peace of mind don't come cheap, and the reality is that for today's we're-at-the-mercy-of-our-nanny parents, the best strategy for keeping your caregiver is to shut up and give her what she wants. As a result, more families are offering to subsidize an ever-escalating array of perks. And they're still reduced to praying that their nanny will stay.

Sometimes even appeals to divine intervention don't work. To attract their last caregiver, a 21-year-old by the name of Patti, Kathleen Finch and her husband, Pete, a magazine editor, spent \$5,000 renovating their home—converting the house from oil heat to gas and moving their office from the third floor to the basement, where the oil tank had been—to give the nanny the entire third floor with a bedroom, a lounge and her own bathroom, more space than anyone in the entire family had. It worked.

And Patti turned out to be every parent's fantasy, a real-life Mary Poppins—creative, loving and like the best big sister in the

world," says Finch. One evening the Finches arrived home to find Patti and the kids in the midst of a "blue night." The girls sported blue hair, wore blue clothes, drank blue milk and ate blue macaroni and blue cupcakes. On another occasion, when the Finches were throwing a dinner party, Patti encouraged them to invite their friends' kids as well. She even set up a carnival in the basement with food, crafts and activities for the children.

But then one night just after the new year, while the Finches were having dinner, Patti entered the kitchen crying. "I don't know how to tell you this," she said, "but I have to leave." The Finches were stunned. "The reason is good," she continued, sobbing. "I've fallen in love." At that moment, Kathleen also began to cry. She promptly shot her husband a glance, and he knew it was time to take action.

"What can we offer you? What can we do?" asked Pete. He told Patti that if her boyfriend, who lived in Tennessee, would move to Connecticut, they would find him a job. They would fix up the space over the garage and make it into an apartment. They would buy the couple a car. "I don't want you to tell us now," added Pete. "Go to sleep and think about anything you want. If we can make it happen, we will."

The following morning, Patti informed the Finches that she was sorry but she had to go; her boyfriend did not want to move up North. The Finches were ready and determined to take nanny benefits to a new plateau, but there was nothing they could do.

THAT, OF COURSE, is the nightmare: The person your children love, who knows the ins and outs of their schedules, their likes

and dislikes, who knows that the peas really can't touch the potatoes and that only the red sneakers are acceptable to your four-year-old daughter, will simply walk out the door one day. Mary Poppins could vanish up the chimney just as abruptly and mysteriously as she dropped down it, and you'd be left holding the bag while you look for a new caregiver. What would you do? Work at home for a while? You can barely have a conversation with a toddler around, let alone get anything done. Lug the kids into the office, where they'll interrupt business meetings ("Dad, pass me the green crayon... I said green") and push every button on your phone, permanently disabling the company's voice mail system? Just quit?

Faced with the alternatives, it's no wonder that many parents willingly—nay, gladly—give their children's caregiver whatever she wants, no matter how absurd it might seem to the casual observer. "If you have a good nanny, you do whatever you can to keep her," says Linda Falk, a Westchester mother of two. When the Falks moved from Brooklyn, New York, to the suburbs, they desperately wanted their nanny, Loretta, to go with them. But Loretta drove a small car that they all agreed wouldn't make the trip comfortably. So they purchased a Volvo for her to drive and included it in her package. "She could've easily gotten a job in Manhattan," adds Falk.

In order to keep her nanny happy while her two daughters were at school, single mother Loretta Cross, a partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers in Houston, let her take a second day job. "I wanted Karin to find friends and be happy here," says Cross. So before meeting Cross's girls when they got off the school bus each day at 4:30 in the af-

ternoon, Karin spent her days working at a local bookstore. Cross bought Karin a cell phone and paid for all her calls and, in return for a weekend of babysitting, gave Karin free airline miles to take a trip to Europe. "Karin gave me the freedom to concentrate on my job and provide for my family," says Cross. "And the bottom line is, if someone's not happy, they're not going to stay with you."

Bea Magana's former employers went one step further. When the Bronxville, New York,

nanny decided to go back to school to finish her degree in elementary education, she scheduled most of her classes for when her charges were in school. But when she spent a semester student-teaching and couldn't get back on time for the kids, her employers, both attorneys, brought in a second babysitter to pick up the slack. What happened when the kids were sick? "The mother would stay home until I got back from school so I didn't have to miss class," says Magana, as though that made perfect sense.

Josh and Janet Levinson of Huntington, Long Island, understand that gesture perfectly. One morning their nanny, Aida Lopez, walked into work and after saying her hellos blurted out, "I need to get my car inspected." Eager to help, Josh, a home media consultant, took Aida's 1972 Toyota Corona to his mechanic the following day and told him to take care of it. Later, Dennis the mechanic called Aida and explained she needed new tires that would cost \$500. "That's so expensive," Aida told the Levinsons that evening. "I can't afford that." Josh and Janet told her not to worry; they would take care of the inspection and new tires. Aida told them they could take it out of her pay, but the Levinsons insisted. In their mind, it was well worth it—Annie and Charlotte, their two young daughters, were driving around in Aida's car, and they wanted to make it as safe as possible.

A few months later, Aida's car needed a new starter. "Okay," said Josh. "Take it down to Dennis. We'll get it fixed." (Read: We'll pay for it.) Six months after that, Aida complained that her brakes didn't feel right. "Okay," said Josh, again. "Take it down to Dennis." Soon after, the car needed a new windshield. By this point, the Levinsons had put \$2,500 into a car with a blue-book value of \$800, and Aida's brown '72 Toyota was purring like a kitten.

But one night not long after Janet, an assistant portfolio manager for a New York City investment firm, got home from work, Aida complained that her shoulders and arms hurt because her car had no power steering and suggested that she might have to get rid of it—meaning she'd no longer be able to commute to work. Clearly, there was only one solution.



when Julia Pistor moved to L.A., she took her nanny along. 'I couldn't do my job without her,' says Pistor.

"I told Aida she could drive my new Land Rover Discovery," says Janet, who began driving the Toyota herself.

GIVING THE NANNY your brand-new \$30,000 SUV does seem crazy, but the truth is that the relationship between parents and caregivers is unlike any other employer-employee dynamic. She works—and often lives—in your home, creating a unique level of intimacy that makes the relationship seem familial. But more important, the nanny cares for the most precious people in your life, your children, and parents will go to almost any lengths to make sure that their children are safe, secure and happy.

When New York-based movie executive Julia Pistor was offered a promotion in Los Angeles, she had just one thought: Would Yvonne move with her family? Pistor came home from work on that September day at about 6:30 and cautiously broke the news to her nanny. "I was nervous to tell her, because if she didn't want to move permanently, or even temporarily, I thought she'd leave me right away to find another job," says Pistor. Eight months pregnant with her second child, soon to take maternity leave and preparing to produce a film in Calgary for three months that winter, Pistor was desperate to hold on to Yvonne.

"I told Yvonne about the job offer and that I wasn't sure if I would take it," Pistor recalls. "But I let her know that her answer was definitely part of my decision and that I'd do almost anything to make it happen." Yvonne said she needed time to think. A couple of days went by, and no one brought it up. Finally, Yvonne had an answer. Sort of. She wanted to consider moving, but wondered what it would entail. Pistor told Yvonne that

she'd have her furniture shipped, arrange to find Yvonne's husband a job, help her find an apartment, give her \$1,000 toward furniture for her new home, give her \$2,000 toward a car, and if she didn't like it after six months, Pistor would move her back to New York. Yvonne agreed to do it.

Relief. Pure joy. Pistor forged ahead and found a house in Los Angeles for her family. Then it was Yvonne's turn. Pistor paid someone to take Yvonne around and, for the five days it took her to choose an apartment, also hired a second nanny. So was it worth it? Absolutely, says Pistor, who puts it bluntly. "Basically," she says, "I couldn't do my job without her."

For parents like Dianna Kesner, who lives in the Chicago suburbs, there is constant anxiety that one day the nanny will just hit the road. "For the first couple of years we had Yvette, I was paralyzed by fear that if something happened and she wasn't happy, she'd leave," says Kesner, owner of an Italian-goods import company. "How could I find someone as good?"

Thinking it impossible and trying to avoid ever facing that consequence, Kesner has said yes to almost everything Yvette has asked her during the past five-plus years. When Kesner returned from a family vacation in Aruba a few years back, she noticed some real-estate flyers on Yvette's bed. "What's all this stuff?" she asked. "Are you moving?" Unbeknownst to Kesner, Yvette and her boyfriend had married the previous month and had made an offer to buy a condo. But with what?

"I might need a little help with the down payment," said Yvette.

"How much do you need?" asked Kesner, frantically trying to do the mental math to

come up with the money to help. But in the back of her mind, all she could focus on was what it would take to keep Yvette working for her.

Yvette said she needed \$8,000, and could the Kesners loan her the money to be paid back over time? After checking to make sure the condo was within commuting distance of her home, Kesner cheerfully wrote the check.

Then one Sunday morning some time later, the phone rang at 8:30. It was Yvette. On their way to rent a video the night before, she and her husband stopped by a car dealership, she excitedly told Kesner. "We got a great deal on a van. Can I come and show it to you?"

As Yvette pulled into the Kesner's driveway, Kesner immediately started figuring how much she had in her checking account. "Do you like it?" asked Yvette. "It's a great deal. We put down \$100 but need \$1,900 for the rest of the down payment. Do you mind? I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

"Fine," said Kesner. "If you really want it." New condo. New car. The next new thing was a baby. Yvette came in to work one morning in February 1999 and announced that she was expecting. Kesner held her breath, fearing, of course, that Yvette would also announce she was leaving. A few hours later, she couldn't hold back any longer and asked Yvette if she intended to continue working. "Sure," said Yvette. "I'll just bring the baby to work with me." Kesner could breathe easy. It was all fine with her. Bring the baby. Just don't leave.

"I know a lot of my friends think I'm a moron," admits Kesner. "But I drive away every morning without a worry. Yvette is the mom I'd be if I were here. What greater peace of mind could I have?" ●