

Breaking In Babysitters

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Doug and Carol have had it with babysitters.

They've had a sitter who set fire to microwave popcorn. Another invited a boyfriend over to watch a ball game. They've found the children awake at midnight or asleep in front of the television.

The couple invite this kind of trouble. They provide no written rules and very little guidance of any kind.

Babysitters should be trained. If they haven't had a formal babysitting course, it's up to the parents to prepare them. They need explicit instructions and rules. And they must understand that babysitting is a job that parents take very seriously. Before handing you child over to a new, untrained babysitter, have the sitter spend a short evening with you and go through the evening routine together.

The best sitters for infants are experienced adults. But no matter what the sitter's age, it is a good idea to prepare written instructions covering the house, safety, and child-care.

Give the babysitter a house tour. Point out the location of all exits, how the locks operate, where the telephones are. Keep emergency phone numbers at the phone. Provide a flashlight in case of power outages. Demonstrate the sound of your smoke alarm. Demonstrate the proper use of appliances.

Also locate first aid supplies and outline fire procedures. Always write down where you can be reached at all times, phone numbers for neighbors and relatives to call in a crisis, and the name and number of the children's doctor. If you will not be near a phone, arrange to call-in once or twice.

Safety rules should be written down and reviewed with the babysitter, including how to handle choking, bleeding, falls, burns and suspected poisoning. Infants should never be left alone on a changing table or bed, even for a second, and older children should never be left alone in the bathtub. Strangers should never be allowed to enter the house.

Also write down child-care instructions, including what children should eat, how to prepare the meal, bedtimes, bedtime routine, and bathing instructions. List any medicines that are to be given and the dosages. Don't forget to explain the rules for disciplining the children.

House rules for the sitter also are critical. For example, no visitors, especially boyfriends, unless you've agreed on it in advance.

Cultivating a babysitter is important work for parents, and good sitters should be rewarded with your respect, personal gratitude, and perhaps a generous tip. The payoff is having a trustworthy sitter to call on – and peace of mind – for years to come.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.