

WHO'S LOOKING AFTER YOUR CHILD?

Nannies, au pairs and babysitters are the answer to many working women's prayers. But when you put your child into someone else's hands, how do you know you can trust the carer? **REAL** investigates

Emma Massey, 25, from Clitheroe, Lancashire, thought she was leaving her 18-month-old baby Joshua in safe hands overnight with registered childminder Wendy Barlow. 'We interviewed Wendy, saw how she was with Josh and built up contact gradually. I'd only leave Josh with three people – my mum, my best friend Louise and Wendy – because I trusted them all,' she later told *The Mirror*.

What Emma didn't know was that the woman entrusted with her child had admitted she was a binge drinker. She had been registered as a child minder despite this. Ofsted – responsible for registering childminders – also failed to tell Emma that Wendy was not authorised for overnight care.

Around 1am on 17 April 2004, Barlow ran a bath. She had drunk two bottles of wine. Joshua woke up and came into the bathroom, and Barlow lifted him into the water. He slipped, and Barlow struggled to lift him out. He slipped once again, banging his head on the side of the bath, and drowned. The child minder did not call 999 for 90 minutes, and when Joshua was found, there were 53 cuts on his body. Barlow was jailed for three years for manslaughter.

Finding someone trustworthy to take care of your child is one of the most serious tasks for any parent. Research has shown that a major reason why people don't leave their children with nannies is due to a lack of childcare qualifications among applicants, according to Lucy Canning, a spokeswoman for the Department for Education and Skills. But many hard-working British parents have no choice but to trust a

near-stranger with their baby, based on a criminal records check, the references of others and their own good instinct.

Most of the time, both family and nanny are responsible and a happy working relationship ensues. 'I've got a 24-year-old trained daily live-out nanny who is an absolute star,' says working mum Sandy*. 'My kids adore her because she is practical, fun and loving and she really cares for them. We pay her a good rate, and involve her in all discussions about the children.' But sadly, very occasionally, the

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person hired to look after the child is not the respectable child-lover they claim to be.

There is a vast difference between a fully-qualified, registered nanny/au pair/childminder, and those who have not been inspected. In England, to be a childminder, legally you must be registered. However babysitters are not regulated. A voluntary scheme listing registered nannies and au pairs has only just got underway. Any parent hiring a registered nanny or au pair can be sure that this is an individual whose criminal record has been checked and who is properly trained. Even then, as the Wendy Barlow case tragically shows, it is impossible to guarantee that any child carer is 100 per cent safe.

The NSPCC is campaigning for registration to be compulsory for all groups of child carers. In the meantime, anyone can call themselves a good nanny, au pair or babysitter.

'There are always going to be risks. Parents have to be absolutely vigilant,' warns David Coulter, a policy adviser at the NSPCC. 'I know of nannies who have used brutal measures of punishment such as cold baths, which we see as cruelty.'

He cautions parents hiring au pairs from overseas: 'It's hard to verify their history – most countries do not have the same level of reference checking as us.'

Just as there are both reputable and untrustworthy nannies, there are good and bad parents. We've all heard the 'Nanny Diaries' stories of young women looking after the unmanageable little terrors of controlling or grudging parents. Employers, especially those who cut corners by hiring cheap au pairs from poorer countries, often make unfair demands of the women whom they expect to adapt to their homes. A punishing workload and exploitative pay, combined with a mistress-servant relationship, can make a nanny's life hell.

Shannon Pitts, chief executive of au pair agency greataupair.com, says that when parents find they have hired someone untrustworthy, they often have only themselves to blame. 'A lot of families are too busy, or lazy and don't carry out proper checks. If something bad is going on, it's likely a poor choice was made. You have to verify everything that the candidate says. Matching strangers with strangers, you can come across people who are of a lesser quality than you would want.'

*Name has been changed >



FEATURE Olivia Gordon PHOTOGRAPHS Keith van-Loen/Corbis/Empics

OUR BABYSITTER BEAT US, STARVED US AND LOCKED US UNDER THE STAIRS

Childhood abuse at the hands of a babysitter left 30-year-old journalist Shauna* traumatised for life

I was a relatively frail, epileptic and asthmatic four-year-old when my parents went on holiday to France to visit my grandparents. My mum and dad hired a babysitter, Nancy*, for the whole three weeks they were to be away. They found Nancy through a reputable agency and her background came highly recommended by great referees. My five-year-old sister Victoria*, my older sister Lizzie*, 10, and I were anything but nightmare kids. We were well-behaved and had been brought up to be polite to strangers.

When Nancy arrived she behaved fine with my parents. As soon as they left, though, we children knew something was wrong. Nancy's moods were changing really quickly. It immediately emerged that she was going to make us kids her slaves for three weeks. If we didn't do exactly what she said, there were punishments, like beating us with the cords to electrical appliances, shoes and my father's belt – which she got out of his closet.

Nancy had a 1970s afro and she made us brush her hair, which was difficult. If we didn't comb it right, she beat us and refused to give us any food. Five-year-old Victoria bore the brunt of Nancy's rages and was constantly terrified. Some days Nancy sent Victoria on her own to the shops to buy her cigarettes and groceries. When she didn't buy the

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right things, or was too slow in coming home, Nancy would fly into a rage and beat her and lock her in the tiny dark cupboard under the stairs with no dinner. Many nights we all went without dinner, locked under the stairs or in our bedrooms. Nancy seemed to forget about us when we were locked away and would only let us out when she remembered. We tried to escape from the house but were too afraid to go far.

The worst night for me was when Nancy put me in the bathroom and told me, 'I want you washed and dried in 15 minutes.' When you're a child of four you get bathed by your parents. I was too young to have any concept of how long 15 minutes was or even time itself. I managed to get into the bath but when I got out I didn't know how to dry myself. Nancy burst into the bathroom and dragged me naked and wet into the kitchen where she beat me with the blender's electrical cord and socket. She was insane.

She spent much of her time seemingly in a coma. We later found out that she was addicted to amphetamines and, in hindsight, we realised that at those times she must have been 'coming down' from the drugs. But at that age we didn't know what drugs were and she just

seemed to be in a bad mood and incredibly tired. On the day Nancy was supposed to drive us to pick up our parents from the airport, we were absolutely frantic to get our parents back. We were actually scared Mum and Dad weren't going to come home. Nancy was laying on the couch, totally unresponsive, and Lizzy had to slap her awake and drag her up and into the car, terrified we would miss our parents. Nancy had three kids in the car on the way to the airport but she wasn't in a state to drive at all. We came very close to having a serious car accident as she drove straight into oncoming traffic.

As soon as my parents saw us they realised something was wrong – and it was obvious to them that Nancy was out of her mind on drugs. Nancy was paid and she left. Then we told Mum and Dad everything that had happened. At first they didn't quite believe us. But when they saw Victoria's bruises on her back from her beatings, they started an investigation into Nancy. The agency that had employed her looked into her and it emerged that she was a speed addict with a lot of problems. That explained all the mood swings. It turned out that other families had made complaints about her in the past, but nothing had been taken seriously until she abused us and our parents' investigation against her was launched.

Nancy was fired from the agency but no further action was taken. It was the late 1970s and it was an innocent time when the neighbourhood 16-year-olds would babysit kids, and child abusers did not seem monitored as they are today. These days people are a lot more careful.

My parents were completely shocked and horrified by what had happened, once they realised how bad the situation had been. They still can't talk about it. My sisters and I were so young but we never forgot any of those three weeks. We don't blame anyone for what happened to us but we still don't mention what we went through, because it is still too painful. We also never say anything much about it to my parents because we know how uncomfortable it makes them – they still feel guilty.

If I had a child, I would think twice before leaving them with a babysitter after what happened to us. I think if my parents had paid more attention to the red flags when Nancy first arrived, they would have realised something was up. On the other hand it was an unbelievable situation – so shocking that in a way, there wasn't much anyone could have done to prevent it. I would advise parents to talk to someone who recently used the babysitter they're about to employ, because the problem with Nancy was that she did have good references. Drugs can enter a person's life really quickly.

It's amazing how as a 30-year-old I can still remember something that happened when I was four in so much detail. If you asked me to remember anything else from that year, I couldn't. Abuse is something that stays with you for a long time.

*Names have been changed

THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE

Nannies who hit the headlines...

2004: Hartlepool babysitter SUZANNE HOLDSWORTH, 34, murdered a two-year-old child in her care by repeatedly battering his head against wooden bannisters, while the mother, Clare, was out at a nightclub. Holdsworth received a life sentence.



1998: Australian nanny LOUISE SULLIVAN – who it later emerged had a below-average IQ of 81 – shook a baby in her care to death in North London. She pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter and received a suspended 15-month jail sentence as well as psychiatric treatment.

2000: Australian nanny MICHELLE BRITTAIN, 24, was acquitted of charges of cruelty to two children in her care. She had been accused of holding a one-year-old girl's hand on a hot oven, and separately of feeding peanut butter to a two-year-old boy with a suspected nut allergy.



1997: British au pair LOUISE WOODWARD was found guilty of shaking American baby Matthew Eappen to death. She protested her innocence and had her murder conviction reduced to involuntary manslaughter. On returning to England she trained as a dance teacher.

I'VE HAD 18 NANNIES IN FIVE YEARS

Eileen MacDonald, 37, a writer from London, has given up on nannies after a string of bad experiences

My book, *Close to Home* (Simon and Schuster, £6.99), about a nanny accused of shaking a baby to death, is based on the Louise Woodward case, but in writing it I was getting even with many of the nannies who have passed through my door. I've had 18 nannies over five years but now don't have one because I can't bear it anymore. We've had valuables go missing and cars smashed. One girl, who claimed to be a non-smoker, locked herself out of the house leaving my baby son alone inside while she went out for a cigarette. She then had to call a glazier to get back in. She told me she had gone outside to cough!

I've tried everything. I've spent a fortune on nanny agencies. I've tried word of mouth, advertising in magazines and local shops, and the Internet. Because of the experiences I've had, I always check references thoroughly, but I don't even trust references anymore. Nannies are often pleasant girls and employers who 'let them go' want to help them, by giving them glowing references. But I think their loyalty should lay with other mothers, first.

We had our first nanny for two years, when I was working in an office – so that proves there's nothing wrong with my family. To be fair to everybody, I think the problem is that I work at home and I see things that perhaps other mothers don't see.

Last year, I hired Suzanne*, who came with fantastic references. I work at the top of the house and on her first day, as I was leaving her with my younger son, Ben*, now four, for the first time, I heard her say something sharp to him. He started to cry and she said, 'Stop crying. Your mother's going to work, you've just got me.' I hung about at the bottom of the stairs, out of sight. Ben said, 'I want my blanket,' and Suzanne said, 'Stop having that tantrum, you can't have it.' He must have stuck his tongue out at her, because I heard her say, 'Put your tongue away because I'm going to chop it off.' I thought she was joking and was going to laugh, but she started to become hysterical.

I went into the kitchen and she had put Ben on top of a high unit. She was getting a pair of scissors out of the drawer. As soon as I went in she said, 'He climbed up there.' I said, 'Ben can't climb up that high, I know he can't.' She left very quickly.

Another nanny, Claire*, took Ben to school with her to pick up his brother Fred*, now six. When they got home she told me Ben had been very naughty. I asked what he had done and she said, 'We won't talk about it, it doesn't matter.' The next day when I went to the school, the school secretary came running over to me and said: 'I've got to tell you what happened yesterday. Your nanny appeared in the office half an hour after school ended to say she had lost Ben.' Eventually they had found Ben out in the street behind a car. Claire had misled me, but because we'd had so many chops and changes I didn't say anything.

A few weeks later, she started taking the boys swimming quite a bit, which seemed great. Then one day, Fred said to me, 'I don't want to go swimming



Eileen MacDonald would not trust a nanny with her sons again

“ I HEARD HER SAY, 'PUT YOUR TONGUE AWAY BECAUSE I'M GOING TO CHOP IT OFF'

again, it's boring.' I asked him why? He said it was because Claire didn't come into the pool with them. Fred was in armbands, while Ben was a complete non-swimmer. It transpired that Claire was leaving them alone in the private pool – where there was no lifeguard on duty – and going to the café for a cup of coffee. When I challenged her, she said, 'Nothing's ever happened to them, has it?' I had to let her go.

Last year I advertised in a travelling magazine and got masses of responses. One Australian girl, Gail*, promised to stay a year. She was very willing and was fantastic with the children. About six weeks after she arrived, she came in to me and said she couldn't come in again because her father was dying back home. She said, 'I know you've had terrible trouble with nannies and you probably don't believe me.' I replied, 'Of course I believe you, you must go.' A couple of days later, I happened to bump into someone who knew her. 'Have you heard about Gail's marriage?', she asked me. I said, 'No, what marriage?' Gail had got married the previous Saturday and had gone home for an extended honeymoon, she said.

Mona* was beautiful and came to us from a very expensive agency. On her first day she arrived in immaculate white clothes. Ben put his fingers on her and she recoiled, jumped, saying, 'Urgh!' She refused to do any cleaning or put the boys in clean clothes because she said it was all right for boys to be messy. She was off sick or on paid holiday more than she was ever with us.

With one nanny my children were pleading with me not to keep her, saying that she was mean and saying horrible things. Unfortunately we had to have her for another two months. I felt awful every time she turned up because I knew my boys weren't happy with her. You can't forever be firing people – because it's upsetting for the children – but, thank God, they've always survived.

I don't think my experience of nannies is any different to anybody else's, except for the fact that I'm around and see things. If you see someone doing or saying something you don't like, you need to be firm and think, 'No, I'm in charge, it's my house and I'm the mother.'

I'm now lucky enough not to need someone on a permanent basis, but if I had another baby I don't think I could leave the child with a nanny. Many parents hand the children over and rush off to work and think as long as the nanny's not hurting them, everything's okay. I think it's a scary business.

*Names have been changed ➤

PARENTS CAN HAVE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Successful nanny Jemma Widdicombe, 25, from Pretoria, South Africa, says it's not always the childcarer's fault. Sometimes parents have unrealistic expectations, she says

I have been lucky with my families and we've never had any arguments, but being a nanny can be tough.

Some overseas nannies are paid shocking salaries and have an unbelievable workload, from 8am until 7pm, then are asked to do babysitting and stay overnight – and they can't cope with that. Language difficulties can make it hard for them to complain, so they say nothing.

If a parent goes through an agency they will get a nanny with two years' experience. My friend referred me to a family who she used to work for. They had such a high regard for her that they didn't even check out my references and just let me go off with their daughter on my first day.

Parents don't always see the faults in their children. If there's an argument between their child and another child, it's seen as the other child's fault. I've been very lucky. My employers have always listened to my side of the story.

“SOME NANNIES HAVE AN UNBELIEVABLE WORKLOAD, FROM 8AM UNTIL 7PM

In my first job, the family worked from home so I became really close to the mum and dad. At first I did struggle with the mother being there, because I didn't know if I should be the one to discipline the child. She wasn't strict and wanted me – unfairly, I feel – to take the role of the disciplinarian.

I do understand how stressful it must be for parents to leave their child with a stranger. But they sometimes have unrealistic expectations. At the beginning of a new job, nannies need an understanding of what is required of them. If you have a problem with your nanny, talk it out, or the kids will start feeling the stress.

But being a nanny is a wonderful job. When the children come home from school and run towards me, that always makes my day.



Responsible nanny plus reasonable parent equals happy child, believes Jemma Widdicombe

HOW TO FIND SAFE CHILD-CARE Advice and tips for parents

- Contact your local Council for a list of registered childminders in your area and details of inspection reports, which include information on any criticisms inspectors have made about them.
- The new **Childcare Approval Scheme**, launched in April, helps parents to find a government-approved registered nanny or au pair. Checks can be made on nannies and au pairs from overseas. For more information visit www.childcareapprovalscheme.co.uk or contact the helpline on 0845 767 8111.
- Au pairs are not appropriate carers for young babies, the government warns. For more advice on childcare, go to www.surestart.gov.uk
- There is no legal minimum age when a child can be left alone, but it is an offence to leave a child alone when doing so puts him or her at risk. The

- NSPCC advises that babies and young children are never left alone at home; children under 13 should not be left for more than a short period, and under-16s should not be left alone overnight.
- When choosing a babysitter, the NSPCC advice is to contact at least two referees yourself; that the sitter should be over 16, and to follow you and your child's own instincts and feelings about them. Contact the **NSPCC helpline** on 0808 800 5000.
 - Always leave your child a telephone number where you can be reached, and make sure he or she is happy about his or her carer.
 - 'You should not mistrust all male babysitters, but be careful of men who always volunteer to babysit and are more interested in your child's friendship than yours', says children's charity **Kidscape**. Make sure your child knows to refuse inappropriate touches and not to keep secrets.
 - Contact the **Kidscape helpline** on 0845 120 5204 (children's dedicated line is 0800 1111) or visit www.kidscape.org.uk.