

## **Babysitting co-op allows Wicker Park families to be social, save money**

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Valerie Bhatt is a 35-year-old mother who didn't know any of the fellow moms in her neighborhood three months ago. Now, they're flocking to her. Bhatt, who has a 9-month-old daughter, is organizing a babysitting co-op, an alternative business that allows families to trade child care services with one another.

"My husband and I still wanted to be able to keep our old friends and social connections, but babysitting gets expensive," Bhatt said.

The average hourly rate for a babysitter is \$17.44, according to the 2013 International Nanny Association Salary and Benefits Survey.

Based on the high interest Bhatt said her co-op has garnered, it seems other parents have similar problems.

On an early-November Sunday in the playground section of Wicker Park, a group of about 15 parents — mostly mothers — gathered around Bhatt to discuss how the co-op will work. The concept is simple: Families sign up to be part of the group and exchange babysitting time with one another. Instead of paying with cash, the program operates on a point system. Everyone who joins starts with 10 points and gives the babysitter one point per hour, plus a quarter of a point for every 15 minutes.

There are also opportunities to earn additional points if the babysitter works between the hours of 10 p.m. and 7 a.m., ends up babysitting later than the designated time, picks up or drops off the children or has good history of not cancelling jobs.

The scheduling and point system will be self-monitored by the participants through Google Spreadsheets. Parents will also exchange coupons to designate how many points they have.

"I don't have any family here, so having a child care option that is based on a bartering system is very appealing to me," said Ilene Siemer, a mother of three children, who are all younger than five years.

Bhatt said that although the point of the program is to provide non-expense child care, her research of other co-ops has shown that this can be quite challenging. After all, the group essentially creates its own currency through the point system. In order for the co-op to thrive, the currency must continue to flow.

Bhatt has developed some strategies to prevent families from racking up and hoarding points. Bhatt said that if this becomes a larger problem, she'll plan to make peak dates or seasons an extra half point per hour.

Like any well-oiled business plan, the babysitting co-op must ensure that it keeps the consumers happy. When dealing with child care, a lot this satisfaction revolves around children's guaranteed security.

Julie Shekell, a mother of a 2-year-old girl, expressed concern that her daughter might be exposed to different punishment techniques, allergies or weapons in another person's house.

"I'm concerned my daughter is going to go some place with an unsecured gun and get shot or shoot someone," Shekell said.

Bhatt said she has tried to foresee these dilemmas. For instance, all families will be required to give information about their gun possession. To curtail harsh punishment of children being cared for throughout the

co-op, Bhatt has set up a sticker system for children to encourage positive reinforcement. A children's good behavior earns them a sticker, which can go toward prizes once they reach a high number.

"The idea is to solve these problems before they even happen so that later on, there aren't any issues and everyone is happy," Bhatt said. "You don't have to cross that bridge when you get to it because it's already been solved."

David Cole, a stay-at-home dad with a 2-year-old son, noted that as a man, his babysitting style might be different than females taking care of children.

"I let [my son] climb and explore and get bumps and bruises, but I'm there beside him the whole time," Cole said.

However, Bhatt has added more security measures to make sure that parents can trust one another to watch each other's children. For instance, everyone in the group is required to do an official background check.

Diane Siemer — Ilene's mother, who ran a babysitting co-op in Creve Coeur, Missouri, 30 years ago — said that she never ran background checks on participants, but that it's necessary to do so in today's day of age.

"I think all of that is good in theory," she said. "I just wonder how many people will actually follow through with all of this." But many participants hope that the babysitting co-op gives them more than several hours of childcare per week. They're also looking to build friendships. As part of the program, Bhatt asks that families participate in one monthly field trip, like going to Lincoln Park ZooLights, the Christkindlmarket and the sledding hill at Soldier Field.

Ilene Siemer said being a part of a babysitting co-op program as a child was a positive experience. She wants the same for her children.

"When you live in a dense, urban area, people tend to kind of want to keep to themselves," she said. "[The babysitting co-op] can foster a sense of belonging and sense of community and make them feel like they have friends in the neighborhood."