

Selecting baby sitter is hardly child's play

By Richard Leach
staff writer

Selecting a baby sitter is not child's play. Child-care experts said finding the right sitter is serious business and requires extensive research by parents.

But parents don't always take the time and effort to check properly the person to whom they're entrusting their children's lives.

"A lot of families will call a baby sitter and hire the baby sitter for Saturday night. Then their next contact is Saturday, and the parents have 15 minutes to tell the baby sitter about the child," said Rose Lebon, a registered nurse and in-service instructor who teaches Annapolis Hospital's Red Cross baby-sitting course.

"You take all the time to nurture and develop a child, and then you go and turn them over to a baby sitter, and all the preparation you give them is 15 minutes?"

Using the wrong sitter — or one who's not been properly prepared — can lead to abuse or to tragedy when an emergency situation arises.

Last month a 24-year-old Livonia woman, Michelle L. Mackey, was charged with killing the 14-month-old girl she was caring for after allegedly becoming angry at the child's crying. Mackey, who has been charged with second-degree murder, told police she had disciplined the child by spanking and shaking her.

BABY-SITTING experts recommend a variety of steps parents can take to find a sitter.

The first is to take a look at the sitter's credentials.

Parents should ask if whether the sitter has taken one of the baby-sitting courses offered by hospitals, schools, the Red Cross and other agencies. The courses can cover everything from feeding and diapering the baby to administering CPR or handling an accidental poisoning.

If the child starts crying, a sitter who has taken a baby-sitting course will have some idea of what to do, said Lynn Lecours, information specialist for the American Red Cross in Detroit.

The Red Cross course recommends that sitters ask themselves a series of questions to find out why the child is crying — Is the child hungry, too warm or too cold, in need of a diaper change, teething, in pain or discomfort, ill, or just lonely because the

parents aren't home? The course then recommends what steps to take in each case.

"You have to go by troubleshooting," Lebon said. "If you go through the troubleshooting, and nothing seems to help, either call the parents or a neighbor. But you don't become frustrated."

The courses also cover what to expect from children at different age levels, so a sitter doesn't feel frustrated because he or she is expecting too much of the child.

"A person who's likely to abuse a youngster is a person who doesn't have a realistic perception of what normal behavior is in an infant," said Katherine Crossley, program director of the Community Commission on Drug Abuse (CCODA)/Livonia Counseling Center.

"People can expect more from a child than a child is able to give in terms of attention, compliance or love."

PARENTS ALSO should ask for and contact a baby sitter's references.

Even a teen who's never worked as a baby sitter before should have a minimum of two references — a clergyman, teacher or school counselor who can attest to the sitter's character, Lecours said.

If the sitter is experienced, parents should contact several parents who currently are using the sitter's services as well as parents who used the sitter in the past, to find out why they no longer use them.

IF THE baby sitter will be using his or her own home to care for the child, parents should check if the sitter is registered with the state.

It's a little-known fact, but sitters who use their own homes to care for children that are unrelated to them and receive compensation in return must register as a family day care home, said Jacqueline Wood, the assistant director of Division of Day Care Licensing of the state Department of Social Services (DSS).

The division can tell parents whether a registered sitter has a criminal record or a history of abuse, Wood said.

The regulation doesn't apply to baby sitters who go to the child's home to baby sit.

"Only when the child is taken from its own home (does) the state feels the risk increases dramatically," Wood said.

It's a misdemeanor for sitters who use their own homes not to register with the state, but many of them apparently don't know about the law or ignore it, Wood said. The DSS estimates only 20 to 25 percent of such sitters actually are registered.

Mackey, the sitter charged in the recent Livonia infant death, was using her own home to watch the infant and was not related to the child, Livonia police said. According to state law, she should have been registered as a family day care home, Wood said.

"But we don't show her to be registered under this name," Wood said.

ONCE PARENTS find a sitter's credentials in order, they should set up an interview with the sitter, and if the sitter is a teen, with the sitter's mother, too.

"We explain to them (sitters) the best way to go to an interview is just as you would for a job," said Lois Ray, a medical assistant who teaches baby-sitting courses at Henry Ford Hospital's Fairlane Center.

"You should have the baby's parents interview your mother, and vice versa."

The sitter and child should have some time together, so the parents get an idea of how they get along.

"Let them have some time alone, where you can see them playing and interacting with the children," Lebon said. "Does the sitter get down at their level, play with them, or is she standoffish?"

Lebon suggests trying out the sitter for short periods, such as a trip to the store, before entrusting the children to the sitter for an extended period of time.

Once they take the job, baby sitters should have a working knowledge of the home — where fire extinguishers and doors and windows are and how to work door locks — in case of a fire or other emergency.

The sitter should have a clear idea of what to do if the child becomes ill or otherwise needs special attention. The parents should leave a phone number at which they can be reached, as well as the number of a neighbor in case there's no answer at the first number.

WHEN "BREAKING IN" a new sit-

ter, parents should observe the sitter in operation, just to make sure things are going smoothly.

"We encourage parents to drop in unexpectedly on a home so they see what goes on in a home when they're not supposed to be there," Wood said. "Drop in at lunch, or get out of work early."

Lebon said it's a good idea to have a neighbor keep an eye on what's going on while the sitter is there.

"Ask the neighbor if anything unusual happened. Did the kids seem under control? You'd be surprised what the neighbors say."

A mistake parents can make is to assign a baby sitter other duties, such as washing the dishes or vacuuming the floor, Lebon said.

"If a baby sitter is frustrated be-

cause things are not getting done, I can see how they could lose control because they didn't know what priorities are," Lebon said. "The first priority is to watch that baby. Nothing in the world is more important than the security of that infant."

"We really emphasize keeping a constant eye on that child, even when it's sleeping," Ray said. "We tell them to check in every half an hour. They don't have to touch them, just make sure they're sleeping peacefully."

PERHAPS the best way to find out how things are going with the sitter are through the child itself.

Parents should check for bruises or any abnormal behavior that would suggest the child is being abused or neglected. Ray recalls one child who

panicked when placed in small room for a hearing test, apparently because he had been locked up in small rooms in the past as punishment.

Older children can talk about their experiences, but Wood pointed out they'll be more likely to open up if it's made part of their daily routine.

"If your child is of the age where they can verbalize, talk to the child every night about what they do at the day care home. If child has it as part of the normal day, they will start telling you what happened."

All the precautions in the world can't guarantee that abuse or accidents won't occur, the child-care experts agree. But such measures greatly increase the odds of a happy relationship between parents, child and baby sitter.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Birthday greetings

Rosa Gruetz, who for a long while said she wanted to live for 100 years, reached the age of 101 Aug. 26, and is now reaching for 102. Rosa Morgan helps read the birthday greetings that came to Farmington Nursing Home, where Gruetz has

lived since 1980. Born in Oppelin, Germany, in 1894, Gruetz has lived in Michigan since she was 1 year old, and is the widow of Edward Gruetz, a yard master for Michigan Central Railroad.

September Special Events

QUILT SHOW

An exhibit of 51 quilts, each depicting a State of the Union. Each quilt contains the State Motto, Bird, Flower, Nickname and Capital. All of the quilts are handmade by Amish and Mennonite women from southern Ohio. They were designed by David L. Allen, an Akron, Ohio area artist. Thur - Sun, September 5 - 8, throughout the mall.

FALL FASHION SHOW

The new exciting styles and colors for Fall '85 come alive, see what Westland has to offer for your fall wardrobe. Sat, September 14, 12 and 4 pm. Central Court.

LIFESTYLE SEMINAR

This month's topic will be "Collecting Antiques." Our guest speaker is Maple Bunch, a well-known Antique Dealer and Show Coordinator from the Detroit area. Complimentary coffee and rolls will be served. The Seminar is free but reservations are necessary. Make yours now by calling 425-5001. Tue, September 17, 10 am - 11 am, Auditorium.

CRIME WATCH

Sponsored by WXYT, Newstalk Radio, a variety of exhibits all centered around crime prevention. Sat and Sun, September 21 and 22.

SENIOR'S HEALTH SCREENING DAY

WKBD-TV, Channel 50 and Foster Medical are sponsoring a health screening day for Senior Citizens. Also participating will be staff members from Home Care Services and Renaissance Home Care. The tests that will be offered are Single-breath pulmonary function test, an oxygen saturation test, glucose evaluation and blood pressure evaluation. All testing is free of charge. Sun, September 22, 12 to 5 pm, East Court.

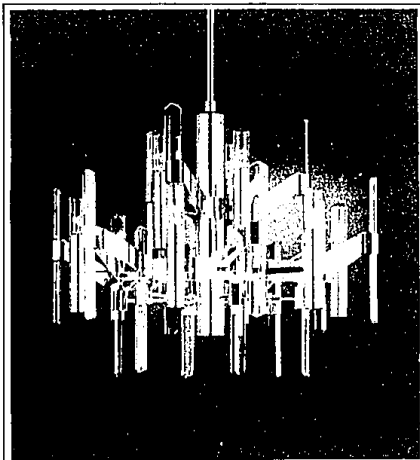
ANTIQUE SHOW

The Center will be filled with Antique Dealers featuring furniture, glassware, jewelry and more. Thur - Sun, September 26 - 29.

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