

Babysitter envy

Forget school places, the search for a sitter is what really drives parents to distraction, says Sharon Wright

People can be so cruel. There I was, happily sipping my red wine on the sofa last night, when my friend mentions going to the cinema. She and her husband had a laugh at the pub quiz last week, too, because her mother-in-law's always happy to babysit for their 18-month-old. I don't do anything undignified, like grabbing her by the lapels and shouting, 'Do you know just how lucky you are?', because she doesn't, and she never will. I simply sit there, fuming. We're living on separate planets. She has babysitters; on the other hand, I have babysitter envy.

People who have family on hand to babysit are in a different world from me. I could weep with jealousy over friends who can go out with their other halves whenever the fancy takes them, knowing Granny will happily watch *Wycliffe* on cable until midnight. I clench my teeth when they say their sister's only round the corner, so they can drop the kids off for the night. How utterly, utterly fantastic would that be?

For those of us who live miles from our families, it's a nightmare. Finding a minder so you can have a haircut is hard enough, so organising a night out with your husband can take on the intricacy of a jail-break.

People offer, of course. In fact, they're forever offering, in a vague, half-bottle-of-Merlot-down way, to babysit 'some time'. This largesse usually comes over dinner at our

house (the main part of our social life, obviously). Yes, in theory, childless friends and godparents are hot on how important it is for us to have a break. But when we ring with an actual date, they are never available.

Mind you, agreeing to babysit and then forgetting is worse. My friend, Mary, had managed to get her three little boys to bed and

and crazy, like go to the flicks or – gasp! – for a curry. Asking fellow parents means negotiating the complicated niceties of how many times you can ask, without starting the dreaded rota.

I ended up in a babysitting club once, when I gave out my number, during a lapse in concentration, at a blue morning. You earned points and traded them. Or something. But

babysitting services. But the last time we got our hopes up for a candlelit dinner à deux in the award-winning restaurant, there was a knock at our door. It was the maid with her sister in tow, duly introduced as 'the babysitter'. She looked a bit like Kathy Bates in *Misery*, so I developed a fantasy migraine and resigned myself to room service again.

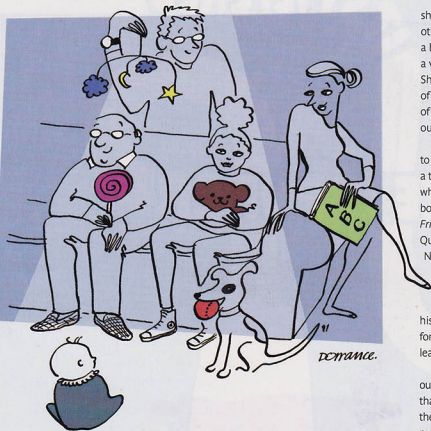
Another time, we were shown the facilities at the otherwise swanky hotel – a baby monitor next to a vacant-looking receptionist. She didn't look capable of overseeing the safety of a goldfish, never mind our five-year-old.

So now I'm on a quest to find babysitter pay dirt – a trustworthy teenager. One who is, let's be honest, a bit bookish and happy to watch *Friends* reruns with a bag of Quavers and a can of Coke. Not one who'll be waiting for the car to disappear before sneaking in her boyfriend and his plastic bottle of cider for a heavy session on the leather sofa.

Nothing blights an evening out like the paranoid suspicion that the babysitter's rolled up the Post-it with your mobile numbers on to snort drugs. So I'll need to know her parents

and have a few testimonials. Essentially, I'm looking for Maria von Trapp in skinny jeans.

For now, I'm trying to keep a lid on my jealousy at the school gates. I don't want the other mums' Miu Mius, flash holidays or high-definition TVs. I want their babysitters. Hey, no-one said babysitter envy was pretty. ■



climb into a posh frock for the ballet. Then she watched the clock tick past the allotted hour for her neighbour to arrive. 'She just forgot,' Mary says. 'She was really upset, but not as upset as I was at having our night out ruined.'

We're stuck with the same scramble for a sitter any time we want to do something wild

there was bad blood if you were in debit. I ended up screening calls in case it was another stressed-out parent demanding to know if I could do Saturday night.

Deciding that we had to get out to save our sanity, my partner and I have tried taking our son with us on weekend breaks, cunningly choosing posh hotels that advertise