



Finding and Keeping Positive Care-givers for Your Child

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Sooner or later, many parents of children and young adults with disabilities need to find a care provider. It might be a babysitter for a Saturday night out, a respite provider to stay a weekend with your child while you go to your high school reunion, an after-school childcare provider, or an attendant to assist your young person with his or her daily activities. It's not easy to find someone you like and trust, then train them and keep them as your employee. You probably think of yourself as a parent, not an employer—but you are about to become an employer now! Here are some ideas for carrying out this new job.

You may be paying out of your own pocket or through a program; if through a program, you'll need to understand the hiring process and requirements. You may be using the CDS model (Consumer Directed Services) where you are the employee of record.

The Hiring Process

Assuming you are ready and eager to find someone to help you out, how do you get started?

1. You have to locate people who would be interested in a part-time job and have the skills, experience and heart for working with someone with a disability. Think about what skills are required to care for your child or young adult, but remember that the willingness to learn might serve as well as previous experience. I have found several very able attendants for my son who had no experience with disabilities but were eager to learn.

Where to find people:

- your own network of friends, relatives and acquaintances; tell everyone you know that you are looking for someone and you might find someone's cousin, sister, daughter, son, or friend who is interested;
- staff in special education programs in public schools;
- students at local universities and junior colleges, particularly students majoring in education; social work, nursing, health and human services, OT, PT, etc.;
- through the web: care.com is the current favorite among many parents I know;
- local agencies or service organizations, non-profits;
- neighborhood or parent listservs; and
- newsletters and bulletins for neighborhoods, churches, parent organizations, community organizations.

You will often need an ad of some kind to recruit potential employees. Try to be realistic about the job requirements yet also make the job attractive. Start with the necessities, such as the hours and days of the week, a basic job description, the pay rate, if the person must drive, etc. But if there is room,

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perhaps you can also mention the benefits of the job, such as what's fun about it or how the job will provide new opportunities to grow and learn. Don't include your name or address or other private information, just how to respond through a phone number or email address. One friend of mine has a website about her son where a potential employee can read a bit about the job and her son's disability and decide at that point whether to pursue the job.

2. Let's suppose that you have gone through the search process and have found someone that you might hire. What's next? You might start with a phone interview that will screen out those that just won't work. What are the deal breakers? Ask if the person is free when you need them, has reliable transportation, smokes, is allergic to pets, whatever is crucial to you. Give more detail about the job (including the less pleasant aspects!) and see if they are still interested. If things seem promising, set up an interview.

3. Your next step depends on what you know about the possible employee. If the person is your best friend's daughter, the process can be more informal. If this is a stranger you located through the web, you should proceed with caution. The interview can occur in a public place, such as Starbucks.

Prepare for the interview by writing down the questions you want to be sure to ask. Try to make the person feel comfortable and get to know them a bit. Ask the person to tell you about themselves, what experience they'd had, why they want the job. Tell them about the job and about your child. Give the person time to ask questions. Know what you are looking for and ask yourself if this person fits your needs.

Be sure you deal with the business end of the job. Talk about money: what the rate is, how often he will be paid, if you will reimburse for mileage and food or other expenses. Write down how to reach him and other basic facts, such as references. Get permission to do a criminal background check; for a background check you'll need her full name and date of birth.

4. Be sure to do the follow-up: call references and do a criminal background check. To do the check, go to <http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/> then select *Crime Records*, then *Services: Criminal History Search*. You will need to create a new account or sign in with your user id and password. Each search costs \$3.00. You enter the name and date of birth and then the results will appear. What you want to see is NO Matching Records; that means the person does not show up in the criminal database. If you are working with an agency or funding source, they will be able to access more in-depth databases.

5. If you and the potential employee are still mutually interested, it's time for this person to meet your child. The meeting can be in a public place or in your home. You need to observe the potential employee interacting with your child and see how your child responds.

Training

Once you've hired someone, you have to get him or her ready to work. Here are some ideas for orientation and training:

- Make sure this person has CPR and First Aid training. You might even encourage her to take

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defensive driving if she will be driving your child places.

- Spend time with the new employee; give him or her a written schedule, procedures, and contact information.
- Be sure he understands your expectations and how to communicate with you.
- Be sure she knows techniques for handling your child's behavior, communication methods and other essentials for your child's care.
- Link him with another person already doing the job so the new person can gain on-the-job training.
- Observe him or her interacting with your child and share what works or is to be avoided.
- Define the first month as a trial period and then talk at the end of the month about whether the job is working out for each of you.
- Check in often to make sure the new employee understands the job and has a chance to ask questions and get further training.

If you feel uncomfortable leaving your child alone with a new person, at first stay at home but remain in another room and leave the new employee nearby with your child. Then leave home but stay close so you could return quickly; stay away only for an hour or so. Gradually extend the length of time you are gone and how far away you go. Build trust over time.

Managing and Retaining Employees

If you like the new person and she is doing the job well, you will probably want to encourage her to work for you as long as possible. You will need to nurture and monitor the working relationship. Here are some guidelines:

- Be sure the employee knows what's important to you.
- Encourage the employee to bring up concerns early on, before they get worse.
- Do an occasional evaluation or assessment where both you and your employee talk about what's going on, what's working well and not working well; give the employee a chance to talk.
- If you are in a program that requires a formal evaluation, tell the employee several months ahead of time what the evaluation will be based on.
- Praise when he or she does something well.
- Give a bonus or gift at holiday time.
- Give a bonus for staying and/or doing a good job.
- Have occasional gatherings for your employees (if you have more than one) to talk, work on schedules, eat and enjoy time together. Work to build a team.
- Provide your employee with the expertise and equipment to do a good job.
- Use some form of record keeping so that each employee can note what went on during his or her time with your child and can share it with the team and family.

Your attitude toward the employee makes a big difference. To retain an employee, you must always be respectful of this person. Never yell at him, berate her, or be overly critical. If you have to confront the employee with negative feedback, think first about how to present it. Communicate your thoughts privately, never in public; don't attack the person but rather comment on the behavior; tell her how to remedy the problem and what you want her to do instead of what she is currently doing.

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We as parent-employers are sometimes in a tough spot, because this is not an ordinary working relationship. This employee may be in your home and may bathe your child, dress and feed him, entertain him. The employee gets to know your child, home and family in a close way. You may end up developing a strong relationship with the employee, even a real friendship. Yet you are also the employer. It's sometimes hard in such a relationship to point out what's going wrong. Somehow you have to maintain a balance between being positive, approachable, concerned, respectful, yet still able to discuss the job requirements objectively; you have to be able to talk about money, performance, and issues that come up. It's a delicate balance and takes practice. You learn the skills as you go to be an effective employer. Putting the time and energy into being a good employer is worth it: you will get the help you need to provide quality care for your child or young adult. Learn to share with another person the joys and challenges of parenting your son or daughter!

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