



the child-care Chronicles

Navigating the practical
distinctions between
nannies and au pairs

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Brazilian au pair for the Alvegaard/Struble family, Debora Coelho, with Nikita Struble.

Ask any child (and parent for that matter) if they want Nanny McPhee or Mary Poppins to move in, and the answer would be the same: When can she start? Who wouldn't want someone who keeps the kids in line, comes equipped with mystical props, and has a knack for giving life-changing advice in the midst of daily turmoil? If choosing a child-care provider was as easy as looking for a flying umbrella, every parent would be standing

Au Pair

An au pair is a young person from a foreign country who lives with a host family to care for the children. Meaning "equal to" in French, the position of au pair originated decades ago to describe a care provider who was treated as a member of, or equal to, those in the family.

After growing up with au pairs herself, Tatjana Alvegaard continued the practice

as area director for Au Pair Care, a national organization based in San Francisco (aupaircare.com). With a detailed screening, interviewing and placement process, Au Pair Care places au pairs from all over the world with families for a one-year term, with the option for extension. Au Pair Care has placed au pairs from the Czech Republic, Spain, Estonia and Brazil, among other countries, with families in the Kansas City area.



Megan and Jon Stephens, and sons Jet and baby Rhys, with their au pair Maria Cabello.

in their yard watching the clouds for any slight movement. Nobody said it would be easy, however. Finding the right person at the right time to fit into your family dynamic and schedule makes spoonfuls of sugar look, well, like child's play.

Is Nanny McPhee actually an au pair? One can only guess Mary Poppin's preferred title. Traveling nursemaid, perhaps. What's in a name, and when it comes to entrusting someone with our children, what does it all mean?

with her own two girls and has had ten au pairs since her oldest daughter was 6 months old. "I wish more people in the Midwest knew about au pairs because it's not just for the wealthy," she says. With an average weekly cost of \$350 (for a maximum 45-hour work week) regardless of number of children, hiring an au pair is an option that many would be surprised to learn is both affordable and accessible. Alvegaard, who is a professional photographer, was the perfect fit

Because an au pair lives with you, her (or less commonly his) role within a family will naturally differ from nanny or other provider. "You can't look at au pairs as simply child care. It's just as much a cultural exchange," Alvegaard stresses. She considered the most successful au pair relationships as those that balanced respecting a family's privacy, while still becoming part of the family unit. The opportunity to introduce different cultures into her home was as much part of Alvegaard's



Au pairs in Kansas City from various parts of the world.

decision as the flexible hours allowed by having an au pair. With visits to former au pairs on their recent summer vacation, Alvegaard considers them much more than child-care providers. "We have extended family all over the world."

Faced with the stress that so many parents feel working with the set schedules of daycare and after-care programs, Megan Stephens and her husband, Jon, decided to explore finding an au pair to care for their two sons. "After struggling with after-school care and infant care, we loved the idea of both children being able to be at home while we were at work. With an au pair, it's like having an older sibling in the house who lives with you," Stephens says. With the help of Au Pair Care, the Stephens found their au pair from Brazil to welcome into their family last summer.

Stephens maintains, "Our biggest piece of advice is to establish the family rules and expectations clearly before you finalize the match. Like any working relationship, it is important to be very clear up front and keep lines of communication open and honest." Watching their older son become more curious about travel and other countries and their younger son learn Portuguese, the Stephens realized the educational and cross-cultural benefits of hosting an au pair. That said, they stressed the importance of understanding and respecting what the au pair is also hoping to get out of the exchange. After spending the last 13 months together, the Stephens recently had to make the difficult trip to the airport to say goodbye to their au pair when it was time for her to return home. Although the relationship has ended, they will remain close from sharing this experience. "We shared our traditions with her and she shared hers with us," Stephens says.

Cheri Versluis, a busy mom of two, echoes that sentiment. She and her husband and kids have been a host family to three au pairs over the years. After trying a traditional nanny when they had just one child, Owen, Versluis realized that she needed more help than a nanny could provide when her daughter, Wren, arrived a few years later. "We wanted the cultural experience of an au pair and had the living space to accommodate the arrangements," she says. The decision was one of the best ones they made for their family. The relationships formed with their au pairs from Sweden, the Ukraine and France have been long-lasting, with Versluis stressing that au pairs are extended family members. "We loved the idea of having someone to learn from," she says. With former au pairs teaching her family about their traditions, native cuisine and religious beliefs, the experience has been

an enriching cultural exchange for everyone involved.

Traditional Nanny

The au pair experience—albeit with benefits—may not be for everyone. If you want to limit spectators of your weekly mud mask ritual and spontaneous kitchen dance-offs to just immediate family, the nanny route may be a better fit. The biggest distinction—nannies don't live with you. They work scheduled hours at a negotiated rate of pay that usually increases per child in the household. Nannies have a variety of backgrounds, a wide range of qualifications and are not subject to the same federal regulations as au pairs. The burden is on you to find the right fit for your family, which may require extensive research, countless interviews and effort on your part, as well as patience.

When her first child arrived, Rachel Simek realized that she needed child care that was flexible and could accommodate her unpredictable hours in the office. Living in Washington D.C. at the time, Simek took advantage of local resources that helped her find a nanny. "We didn't consider an au pair because we just didn't have the space," she explains. Simek wanted the convenience of in-home care while maintaining a sense of privacy and alone time with her family. "I loved the fact that she came to us," she says. "There was no loading the kids into the car seats and hurrying to find their shoes in the morning before we left for work." When Simek and her family relocated back to Kansas City, saying goodbye to her nanny was as difficult as saying goodbye to her friends. "She was a trusted member of our family for four years, and it was a great experience."

Although personal references are an excellent way to find a nanny, there are services available that take the guesswork out of the process if you are without

such a connection. NannyReviews.com was launched in May 2013 as a forum for families to connect with potential providers. College Nannies + Tutors (collegenanniesandtutors.com) is a highly respected and trusted resource in the area, and Nannies of Kansas City Ltd. (nannieskc.com) has been helping place nannies with families in the area for more than 30 years. Care.com has detailed profiles of nanny candidates online that help begin the research process, which is a critical first step to finding the right nanny.

Harley Ratliff and his wife, Nicolle, understand the importance of this process firsthand. Life became a bit less predictable—and a lot more exciting—when they found out they were having twins. Born at 32 weeks, however, their primary concern was finding someone they could trust to help care for their infant daughters. Using the resources at care.com, the Ratliffs were able to find a nanny who was qualified and had the experience necessary to juggle the responsibilities that come with caring for twins. Encouraged by the advanced degrees and resumes of available nannies, they found their second nanny the same way and were pleased with the creative games and projects she brought to the table when the girls were approaching their toddler years. "If there is advice that I'd give someone considering a nanny, it would be to consider the age and developmental needs of your child at the time when interviewing," Ratliff says. "You may need a different nanny for different ages" depending on the providers' personalities and their day-to-day approach to child care.

One thing is remarkably clear. Whether nanny or au pair, neither may sing when they administer medicine nor sew play clothes out of ugly curtains. But if you find someone who loves your children and fits perfectly within your family, that's all the magic you need. *

a cultural incentive

The decision to welcome someone into your home for a one-year commitment should not be taken lightly, nor should it be just as casually dismissed. In no other context (short of a summer-long European adventure) can you expose your children to a different language, traditions, foods and culture in such a unique and loving environment than hosting an au pair. In the mind of a child, the world may be very small; au pairs show them how big the world really is so that they too may want to explore it one day. You can visit Tatjana Alvegaard's blogs at kansascityaupairs.blogspot.com and tumblr.com/blog/aupaircare-kansascity.

Dotting those i's...

Choosing a nanny, although arguably the most stressful and time consuming step, is simply one part of the process. Tax obligations, a written contract and negotiating paid vacations or holiday time are just a few of the not-so-fun (yet crucial) practical aspects of hiring an employee. If you're considering hiring a nanny, take the time to thoroughly research the business side of things so there are no surprises or undue stress after the fact. Services are also available to take the headache out of the business-side of things by assuming the responsibility of payroll and tax obligations for you. Check out homeworksolutions.net for an overview of packages and services.