



FINDING QUALITY IN-HOME CARE

In-home care for children with disabilities is an option frequently overlooked by working parents because of their unfamiliarity with how to locate a quality in-home caregiver. To find an in-home worker who goes beyond the call of duty (e.g., helping with homework, fixing meals and playing with the child) and cares for the child in a way that integrates him/ her into the community (e.g., activities outside the home) is truly a priceless caregiver. By having the child spend time in formal and informal community activities, a child with special needs has the opportunity to provide gifts to others.

The following article will address how to find a quality in-home caregiver for school-aged children with emotional, behavioral or mental disorders. The process to hire, train and supervise an in-home worker will be described using personal experiences and insights from my family's experiences with in-home caregivers for our 11-year-old child with autism. A unique aspect of our situation is that my husband has a chronic progressive form of multiple sclerosis which has not allowed him to work outside the home for several years. My role as sole provider is not likely to change. Therefore, our need for a quality in-home caregiver for our son is important.

FAMILY NEEDS

By taking the time to investigate your family needs, the process of finding a caregiver becomes easier. One option is to begin by doing a mental inventory that explores who you are as a family. The following are examples of questions you may want to explore while doing an inventory of your family's needs.

- Does your family operate more comfortably with routine or less structure?



- Is your lifestyle casual or more formal?
- Is the atmosphere in your home more serene or lively?
- Does your family life include religious rituals on a regular basis?
- What are your family values?
- Do you prefer someone who has similar values and/or a lifestyle to match your family's lifestyle?

Based on this initial assessment, you may want to make a list of the personal qualities you desire in an in-home worker that would blend with your family's life. The following represent examples of qualities we look for regarding an in-home caregiver. We want a person who is organized because of our son's autism and our overall family structure. On the other hand, we want someone who is comfortable with spontaneity since we tend to make last minute plans. Additionally, a caregiver who is playful and enjoys humor fits well with our family. To have a clear picture of your family's needs and the qualities you are looking for in an in-home caregiver assists one in creating a job description.

JOB DESCRIPTION

A job description to locate an in-home caregiver is developed based upon your family's needs and how you want to present your child and his/ her disability. Some parents prefer to protect their children at home from the attitudes of strangers. Others support the integration of their children into the community. It is important to be clear on what you expect the in-home caregiver's role to be with your child.

It is a good idea to prepare a job description that clarifies required tasks and approximate work hours. When applicants respond, you will be ready with a list of

duties and expectations. We have revised our list several times due to experience with prior caregivers and our child's development. Prior to designing a job description, other questions to ponder may include:

- Will the position be served best by one person or as a job-share arrangement?
- What time commitment do you expect of the caregiver?
- Will the worker support your child with challenges and work with siblings?
- Is housework required?
- What additional duties are included e.g., prepare school lunch, supervise personal hygiene, transport to lessons, clubs, therapy appointments, monitor prescriptions, etc.?
- Describe the way you teach and/or discipline your child.
- Will the worker attend IEP meetings?
- What unexpected situations might arise in your family e.g., occasional late nights, school closures, vacations, family emergencies, illness?

ADVERTISING FOR AN INHOME CAREGIVER

After creating a job description and identifying characteristics you desire regarding an in-home caregiver, the next step is to advertise for a quality worker. Be creative, spend extra money on the design of the flyer, you will increase the job's appeal, and potentially screen out unqualified applicants. In the advertisement, use positive descriptors to emphasize the potential rewards of working with your child, and select a few key words to highlight in the flyer. Examples of advertisements include:

Child care for **delightful boy** (11) with autism. Experience preferred. Fun, nonsmoking home. Need own car. References required. Good student schedule 123-4567

Help develop community connections for teenage girl with emotional challenges. Looking for positive, creative person wanting to "make a difference" in her life. Good driver, references. 123-4567.

Once the flyer is complete, be creative about where you place your advertisement. For example, our son is on a special diet so we advertise at natural food stores in addition to college campuses and the local newspaper. Other families advertise in places of worship and utilize caregiver placement agencies.

SCREENING APPLICANTS

Before receiving calls from applicants, you may want to consider how you will screen them e.g., by phone contact or through a resume. Our family uses the phone call as a way to screen people. In the initial screening process, it is important to ask the applicant basic questions that will help narrow the search for a quality in-home caregiver. Also, during a phone conversation, some applicants make requests that may not directly benefit your child e.g., to bring a child into your home or offer to watch your child in their home. My rule of thumb is to screen-out people who make suggestions that do not appear to assist my child or family.

When people call, the following areas are usually covered in our screening process. Our expectations of a caregiver e.g., having a car, related experience, available hours, a nonsmoker and a one year commitment. The described expectations are essential for our family, and for this reason, we are unable to alter our expectations. Once we've responded to the applicant's questions and shared our expectations, we decide whether to continue the conversation with the prospective employee. If we have an interest in talking further, we share a typical day in our family, referencing the list of duties (discussed earlier in the article), and explore the applicant's time commitments and future plans.

After covering the above areas, if the potential employee fits with our family's expectations and s/he expresses an interest in the job, we schedule an interview. However, prior to discussing the interview, it is important to decide where you would like to have the meeting e.g., in your home or a public place. Also, to remind the applicant what to bring (e.g., personal/professional references, a driver's license, car insurance face sheet and a resume) is helpful.

INTERVIEWING

In the first meeting, my husband and I talk to the applicant without our son. We create a friendly atmosphere during the interview process by using humor, casual conversation and a beverage. Applicants give more accurate first impressions, if they are less nervous. After introductions and the opening conversation, you might want to ask the applicant if s/he has any questions since the phone contact. Encourage the person to ask questions throughout the interview. I feel more comfortable when someone demonstrates creativity and initiative by asking

questions. Often an interviewee will ask questions that pertain to his/her particular situation e.g., potential time conflicts, a previously scheduled vacation, activities to do with your child and gaps in work experience.

After the candidate's questions have been answered, give the applicant the opportunity to read the job description for clarification, and to consider if the duties are acceptable to him/her. The following represents some possible questions to ask regarding the duties you list e.g., What appeals to you most on the list? What tasks are least desirable to you? What do you think needs to be added to the list? From this inquiry, you can tell if the candidate has an organized approach. You can also ascertain an applicant's willingness to question something that is not clear. Once the interviewee reads the list of duties, we ask if there are any concerns. You may want to revisit potential concerns later in the interview.

In addition, it is also important to acquire a detailed work history e.g., job history, relevant work experience (volunteer or paid), schooling and life experiences that enhance the applicant's suitability for the job. Do not hesitate to inquire about time gaps in work, repeated job changes or anything related to prior employment.

Some other questions you might ask include:

- Talk about a time you said no to an employer.
- What has been your most difficult challenge in a job and how did you manage the situation?
- Caregiving is a demanding and rewarding job. How will you handle the demands?
- What is your experience with a child's difficult behaviors?
- What do you think is the most effective discipline?
- What forms of discipline have you used in the past with children?
- How do you handle conflict with a child?
- Would you consent to a criminal check and an inquiry into your driving record?
- If the applicant shows reticence to answer the above questions, I would not advise hiring this applicant.

Along with the above areas, an assessment of the applicant's experience with your child's particular disorder (e.g., ADHD, Bipolar, Tourette's, OCD or Anxiety) is critical. I would encourage you to focus on whether a candidate can manage him/herself when a child presents difficult behaviors. Does the candidate remain in control of his/her emotions and not take the behaviors

personally? Also, if people seem overly concerned with compliance, I screen-out these potential caregivers. I emphasize to the applicant that I want a worker who uses positive behavioral methods, and seeks to understand my child's needs and behaviors.

When you have decided on a likely candidate, have them provide references from past jobs and other life experiences. Ask the candidate for people s/he has known over a period of time who will shed light on her/his character, stability and/ or background e.g., parent of a best friend, family neighbor, a school guidance counselor or instructor. Along with references, a criminal check and an inquiry into his/her driving record would be another way to finalize your choice of a worker. The person you hire will be an intimate household member and entrusted to care for your child. When selecting a caregiver, we error on the side of caution.

After we are comfortable with the applicant, the person then meets our son. It is helpful to observe how the initial encounter between our son and the person goes. We also notice how our pets react to the interviewee, and how the person responds to the animals. The comfort of our family members (child and pets) with this new person is a key factor in hiring a caregiver.

COMPENSATION

Salary is often discussed during the phone contact and the interview. Worker pay is based on what is feasible for your family. However, keep in mind that work with children with mental, emotional or behavior disorders can be demanding. In order to find qualified people, it is important to distinguish between the cost of in-home care for children with disabilities and the general rate for childcare. If it is possible, begin the in-home worker's pay slightly below the highest wage you can afford. Then you have the option of giving the worker periodic raises to reward effective work, and to promote incentives for the in-home caregiver to stay longer. Training with pay is another incentive you can offer the worker.

Besides the rewards mentioned, other possible benefits might include e.g., vacation or sick days, medical insurance, assistance with car insurance or use of a car. Families may also consider bartering arrangements e.g., room and board for a specific number of hours worked and trading services.

ORIENTATION AND TRAINING

During orientation, the candidate acquaints him/herself with the routine of the household and gets a sense of a typical day. We do not finalize a job offer until the worker experiences our routine for a few days, and everyone feels comfortable with the arrangements. Also, in the initial phase of orienting the worker, it would be worthwhile to have the person observe the current caregiver and ask questions.

After observing for a few days, you might want to ask the in-home caregiver for his/her impressions about working with your child, offer the worker feedback and provide any further information that might help with orientation. We consider our son's input regarding the new caregiver important, too. Additionally, during the training process, the current worker can observe and make suggestions to the new worker while s/he is in the role of the caregiver. Having the two people work as a team allows your child more time to acclimate to a new person.

Along with on-the-job training, we strongly encourage caregivers to continually increase their knowledge of autism. At our expense, we provide access to relevant articles, tapes, newsletters, and books along with upcoming workshops. Another means for the worker to stay informed of autism as well as our child is to attend IEP meetings, not only to remain apprised of school issues, but also to communicate information regarding our child to school staff. If meetings occur outside of the regular work schedule, then we pay the in-home caregiver for overtime.

One last element of the orientation involves providing the in-home caregiver with a written medical release form in the event you cannot be reached in an emergency. You can acquire free, blank release forms from most hospitals. Besides the release form, it is imperative that the in-home caregiver be trained in first aid techniques.

ONGOING SUPERVISION

In our situation, we have two people who job share which requires effective, ongoing communication for them to work collaboratively as a team. It is important for them to meet monthly to problem solve, share information and define priorities. Our workers utilize an "at-home notebook" to communicate with each other regarding e.g., unique approaches tried, specific challenges and day to day scheduling information. Also, a calendar is used to note work hours completed, and to post a daily checklist of essential tasks. We make a point

to talk at the end of each day to exchange information and discuss future plans.

Another communication tool is our "home-to-school notebook". Family, in-home workers and school personnel communicate pertinent information to each other using this easy notebook system. Once a year, the IEP team redesigns the "home-to-school notebook" sheet so the information will be useful as our son makes developmental changes.

One last area of supervision I would like to discuss involves boundaries. To find a balance between an optimal level of service for the child and your family's boundary is challenging for the family and the in home caregiver. The worker is exposed to your family culture including daily stresses. The caregiver needs clear guidelines regarding when to take part in family discussions or to remain quiet. Along with the above guidelines for the caregiver, the child, parents and worker need to be clear on who is the primary caregiver when all the adults are present in the home. When do you override what the worker tells the child? Which issues does a worker deal with and which require your input? Because of the potential for confusion regarding boundaries and roles, the need for ongoing communication between the adults and child are vital.

There are many things to consider as you pursue in-home care for your child, but the satisfaction of knowing your child has quality care will be worth the effort to find a worker. If you are prepared to nurture and train a worker, the in-home caregiver's and your family's experience will be positive. Workers receive outstanding training, and the benefit of working with a child with special gifts. Many former in-home caregivers have taken these gifts of experience with our son to become valuable professionals in mental health and special education. We are grateful that the in-home caregiver's knowledge and experience in working with our family enhances human services to children with disabilities in the community.

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