

Growing Concerns

A parenting question-and-answer column with Dr. Martha Erickson of the University of Minnesota

Editor's note: Dr. Erickson was not available to complete her column this week. The column below is from the Growing Concerns archive.

Question: A 12-year-old neighbor has expressed interest in baby-sitting for our two young children, and she strikes me as someone who would do a great job. But my husband says a 12-year-old is too young. What are your thoughts?

Answer: There's no magic age at which a person is mature enough to baby-sit. Some 12-year-olds are up to the task and others are not. The best babysitter we ever had for our children was 12 when she began, and over the years she became like a big sister or favorite aunt for our children. You obviously are seeing qualities in this girl that lead you to think she would care well for your children, and you may well be right. But so that both you and your husband will feel comfortable with this decision, I suggest you and your husband look thoroughly into her skills and experience -- something parents should do when choosing a babysitter of any age.

To do that, arrange an interview with the girl and, if possible, one of her parents. Here are some questions to ask:

- What experience has she had caring for children? Has she cared for younger brothers and sisters, children in her church nursery, other neighbors' children? If so, would she mind if you called for a reference?
- Has she taken any classes that would help prepare her to baby-sit? For example, many communities offer baby-sitting classes, first aid for children, or other relevant courses.
- What does she know about how children behave at different ages, basic childcare approaches, and appropriate discipline strategies? You could test her knowledge by describing some typical challenging situations with your children and asking her how she would respond.
- How does she handle responsibilities at home, such as taking telephone messages or carrying out simple food preparation?
- Is she able to find resources when she needs them? For example, looking up phone numbers and making businesslike calls, finding information in a reference book, reading and following directions on a prescription label?
- How would she deal with an emergency situation? I'd suggest you pose several hypothetical situations and ask her what she would do.
- If, after the interview, you think the girl has potential as a baby-sitter, I'd suggest you ask her to take care of your children once or twice while you do other work in the house or the yard. This will give her and your children a chance to become comfortable with each other and will allow you to help her learn more about how you prefer things to be handled in your home. Then, if all goes well, she'll probably be ready for a "solo flight." When that time comes, just be sure to make your expectations clear -- and be sure she has the number of a nearby adults who will be available in an emergency.