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Mommy's watching

Call it spying or just good parenting— keeping track of caregivers has never been easier.

By Nicole Caccavo Kear



Private eye Feeling snoop-y? There are gadgets galore that allow parents to watch sitters.

Photograph by Jeff Gurwin

New Yorker Rhyder McClure started building his own nanny cams 16 years ago, when his daughter was an infant and the Internet was something only university computer researchers knew about. Word of his monitoring devices spread, and after a few years of making systems for friends and acquaintances, McClure left a career of computer consulting and teaching at NYU to create the NY Nanny Cam Company (nynannycam.com). Today, for a \$1,200 flat fee, McClure will set up a system to monitor your entire home—nanny, baby and all—and stream it as live video, 24/7, to a password-protected website. "You're instantly in your home, eyes and ears," McClure explains. "With the technology we have now, it's bordering on irresponsible for parents not to take advantage of it."

No worries on that front. Nanny cams are a booming business, as is clear from the 50 percent increase McClure's business has seen since 2000. And those cameras are just one part of a whole panorama of sitter-surveillance options that have become available in recent years: There are tattletale blogs like sawyournanny.blogspot.com, where anonymous eyewitnesses report on transgressions that range from smoking behind the stroller to handling their charges roughly. Members-only services like HowMyNanny.com will send you a license plate to hang on your stroller, so that passersby who observe your nanny's conduct (good or bad) can send a message to your personal account. Then there's Whereismybaby.com, run by Georgetown-trained attorney and licensed private investigator Tamara Piebald, who provides surveillance options that run the gamut of tech savvy. For old-fashioned types, Piebald hires herself out as a flatfoot, trailing nannies through playgrounds, parks and pizzerias. For the cutting-edge crowd, she follows sitters remotely, by installing portable GPS devices in their diaper bags.

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If you're in the market for a monitoring service, the sky (or at least your high-speed connection) is the limit. Of course, there is the not-so-small matter of invading someone's privacy, which many people find uncomfortable or even unethical. (Take those covert nanny cams hidden inside teddy bears, for instance.) But one local mom argues that checking in on caregivers needn't be clandestine: "I don't consider this spying on your nanny," she contends. "My feeling is that you sit your nanny down and tell her what you're doing."

Where do respect and honesty fit into the picture? "I think relationships where nanny cams seem like a good idea are relationships that need work," says Gowanus mom Ann Henstrand. "If you can't walk away without looking back, you shouldn't walk away at all." But one Fort Greene mom currently shopping for a nanny cam disagrees: "Very few jobs exist in which nobody oversees you or requires a way to evaluate you," she argues. "I'm sure my six-month-old is safe with his sitter, but I'm paying a pretty good chunk of money and I want to make sure he's getting the level of care I'm paying for."

As surveillance options grow in popularity and sophistication, support for the trend has come from an unlikely place: "I've gotten calls from parents who need a camera because the nannies they want to hire won't work without one," says McClure. Documenting the day protects not only parents' interests but the nanny's as well, reducing the chance that she'll be accused of doing something she didn't do. Of course, what that says about the quality of trust in such an important relationship is debatable, but as the saying goes, better safe than sorry.

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