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## When the Sitter's an Artist

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Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal

Dani Davis, right, with her daughter, Nina, and baby sitter Maggie Sheffield.

Nine-year-old Nina Howland is on winter break from school, so her regular baby sitter, Maggie Sheffield, has been spending more time than usual at her Upper West Side apartment.

Last week, the two choreographed a dance to Selena Gomez songs. A few days earlier, they made Christmas

presents for Nina's classmates out of popsicle sticks, construction paper and mini pom-poms.

Ms. Sheffield, who baby-sits Nina nearly every weekday, is what's known as an artist baby sitter, or "artisitter." It's a relatively new title, and it's exactly what it sounds like: a professional artist who looks after others' children and engages them in creative activities. Projects might include making a modern-art replica with crayons or writing and performing a play based on a favorite book. For many sitters, it's a welcome alternative to waiting tables.

"It's more fulfilling to be helping people than serving them a hamburger," said Ms. Sheffield. "I tend to go with crafts because I think it's really universal. Kids in the city are so busy, and it's a peaceful activity as their day winds down. But it's very adaptable, too."

Ms. Sheffield works for Artist Babysitting, a five-year-old company founded and owned by Shannon Darin. Ms.

Darin, like many of her charges, stumbled into the business while working toward a Broadway career. Between auditions, she earned extra cash by baby-sitting for the Howlands and other Upper West Side families. When she was unable to make it to a job, she'd feel responsible for finding a replacement sitter. It took hours and she often relied on her artist friends to fill in.



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Nina Howland, 9, makes a Christmas gift for her friend with the help of baby-sitter Maggie Sheffield, who is not pictured.

"It wasn't an idea of, 'I would like to start a business,'" Ms. Darin said. "It was more like, 'OK, this is what's happening, and I'm doing this already.'"

With help from attorney Tom Egan, she opened Artist Babysitting in 2006 and built a clientele of more than 350 families on word-of-mouth recommendations. She runs the business out of her Upper West Side apartment.

Around the same time, Kristina Wilson had a similar idea, though it was born of fairly different circumstances. Ms. Wilson, who studied vocal performance at New York University, went to work for Morgan Stanley after college and shuffled back and forth between the office and auditions, rehearsals and performances.

"I never got in trouble at work, but it was literally unsustainable," Ms. Wilson said. "I just wanted to make a company that was for the arts, by the arts, with the arts, with the artist as the help. So I made a list of everything I wanted in a perfect job."

After hearing colleagues at Morgan Stanley lament the dearth of good sitters, Ms. Wilson approached her boss, who helped her launch Sitters Studio.

The two agencies don't communicate with each other, but they do share a specific, targeted concept for artist baby-sitting—one with a throwback twist: Television and surfing the Internet are strongly discouraged and, for the most part, prohibited. Both Ms. Darin and Ms. Wilson make sure their sitters know how best to play to their own artistic strengths, but are also prepared with back-up plans.

"You got to have a lot in your bag of tricks," said Ms. Sheffield. "If you're forcing a kid to do an activity that's not fun for them, it may seem to them just as boring as taking out the trash."

The pricing for both companies begins at around \$20 an hour and can rise depending on the number of children, and both offer their services at various hotels for a higher fee. They employ more performing artists than visual artists, which reflects the demographic in New York and also the owners' interests. Ms. Wilson explained that the makeup is reversed in her hometown of Chicago, where she operates a second Sitters Studio, managing 30 to 40 artisitters remotely. (A third "artisitter" company, Creative Sitters, also recently launched in the city.)

In New York, each agency employs about 90 sitters, most of whom are in their 20s or 30s. At Artist Babysitting, Ms. Darin matches each one to particular families using an initial in-home consultation.

"I go to their homes and get a feel for who they are, and I make sure it's a safe environment for my sitters, so they feel comfortable," she said. "The matching process is looking at the client; outside of their immediate scheduling and baby-sitting needs, we try to look deep into who they are and what sitter they would be best matched with. We find that the kids end up benefiting tremendously. It's a safety feature for both sides."

Dani Davis, Nina Howland's mother, was Artist Babysitting's earliest customer, signing up before Ms. Darin devised her matching system. But as a working single parent, she is familiar with many of Ms. Darin's sitters. She appreciates that Nina and her 15-year-old son, Noah, can interact with a range of creative adults—an opera

singer one week, a photographer the next—and she feels she can trust the community of artists Ms. Darin has assembled.

"When you're making art, there's a vulnerability in it," Ms. Davis said. "Imagine doing that with somebody outside of your family and your school environment, and you start to go, 'Hey, I can express myself creatively.' It inspires a sense of independence. No matter who comes, I know my kids are having an enriching experience."

Ms. Davis, a theater producer currently working on the tours of "Shrek" and "Billy Elliot," said she's comforted in knowing that she can have a sitter at her door within two hours.

The artist baby sitters enjoy the flex-time, too.

"You're not in trouble if you have a callback [for an audition]," Ms. Sheffield said of the shift scheduling at Artist Babysitting. "Shannon gets it."

Part of that is recognizing that the artisitters need support in their efforts to become professional artists. Ms. Wilson's Sitters Studio has three studios in its new office on West 30th Street, and some of the sitters use them to run their own theater companies, or just to warm up before auditions.

Ms. Wilson joked that artistic baby-sitting is a natural fit for New York City, where young artists looking for work can hook up with a clientele base in search of credentialed, creative sitters.

"I think the saying is, 'If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere,'" she said. "I always say that our agency is actually reversed: If you can make it here, that doesn't mean you can make it anywhere else. This is the one place that for sure this would work."

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