

Home & Family - Family Matters

Hiring Someone Else To Potty-Train Your Kids, Teach Them to Ride a Bike

By Hilary Stout

IT HAS COME TO THIS: It is now possible to outsource most aspects of parenting.

The burgeoning industry of services aimed at harried parents, which began with the likes of birthday-party packages at gyms and pizza shops, has expanded to the point where you can now hire someone to assist with everything from potty-training your toddler to getting your teenage daughter to agree to a passably modest prom dress. "Fussy baby" services in Chicago, Denver, Brooklyn and Oakland, Calif., help comfort shrieking babies. In the New York suburbs, an entrepreneur has built a flourishing business by taking over one of the most timeless parental rituals of all: For \$60 an hour he teaches kids to ride a bike.

"Childwork, as I would call it, is one of our economy's growth industries, as affluent parents try to balance work and family, deal with ever intensifying anxieties, and give their kids a leg up in the race for success," says Steven Mintz, a historian at the University of Houston, who specializes in childhood.

The phenomenon comes amid a growing and widely publicized body of literature -- essays, novels, Web blogs -- about the difficulties and dark side of parenthood, particularly motherhood. Many reflect the feelings of affluent, professional women who are accustomed to having control of their own success -- and find themselves uncharacteristically flummoxed by sleep deprivation, tantrums and other unscripted moments of parenting.

Parents like these, who come out of a workplace culture that brings in the "experts" to tackle any problem, are sometimes inclined to seek out similar expertise in their family life. It is the same mentality that leads parents to enroll 2-year-olds in art classes (a booming business these days), instead of scribbling with them at the kitchen table, or to hire a batting coach for their

Little Leaguer instead of playing catch with him in the backyard. "I think almost every parent in my neck of woods would hire a batting coach," Mr. Mintz says.

During the past year, the Soho Parenting Center in New York has experienced a 50% increase in the number of parents coming in for "consultations" on a range of classic parenting challenges, including getting the baby to sleep through the night, cajoling the toddler to eat his vegetables, and -- one of the most popular of all -- potty-training. The cost is usually \$185 for an hour-long session, \$350 for the session plus a week of e-mail follow-ups. "There's just so much worry," says Lisa Spiegel, the center's co-director.

It starts with birth. Over the past five years, Nannies & More, a nationwide child-care service, has seen a tripling in its placements of baby nurses, women who live in your home for a few weeks to help with a newborn. After those early days, you can turn to a new profession: a parent coach, who for about \$75 per hour will do such things as help you say "no."

While many parents wouldn't dream of paying for such services and prefer to stick with the time-honored tradition of winging it, others consider them a god-send. Sarah Cunningham, a 34-year-old first-time mother in Brooklyn, was driven to near despair by her infant son's incessant crying. Her pediatrician said the baby had colic and would outgrow it. But when nothing -- not rocking, not fresh air, not running the vacuum cleaner or carrying him around in a sling -- calmed him, she called a firm called Fussy Baby Support Services. The founders, an occupational therapist and a clinical social worker, spent 2 1/2 hours observing the baby at home. They concluded he was over-stimulated, then taught her a more comforting way to hold him and ways to make his surroundings more soothing. "He is much better than he was," Ms. Cunningham

says with clear relief.

One of the allurements of parenting services is they help avert some of the exasperating confrontations of childrearing. Annie Kramer of Armonk, N.Y., recalls when her husband tried to teach their older daughter how to ride a bike. "It was horrible: Fighting, 'You're not listening,' 'You're not paying attention.'" They gave up. Then, they heard of Aresh Mohit, who built a business, now called High 5, teaching bike-riding (and other sports) to kids. He taught two of the Kramers' three kids to ride in one day.

Indeed, Mr. Mohit finds part of the secret to his success is getting the parents out of the way. "I say, 'It's really up to you, but they'll do better if you don't stay,'" he says.

Personal shoppers at Macy's find mothers often turn to them not only to help select back-to-school wardrobes but also to defuse tension over the appropriateness of an outfit. "There's no question" that the girls are more malleable when mom isn't around, says Linda Lee, who runs the personal-shopping service of Macy's East.

Because parent-child relationships can be loaded, an outsider may engender more obedience. But abdicating all the disagreeable moments may make for a more sterile bond between parent and child. "You lose some things in the fabric of your relationship," says Alan Hilfer, a child psychologist at Maimonides Medical Center.

Lisa Jacobson, chief executive of Inspirica, a tutoring and test-preparation service based in Boston and New York, was sitting on her front porch, one evening and heard the classic tones of a mother-daughter showdown over homework coming from her neighbor's house. She went over and encountered the two in a roomful of scattered papers. A new arm of her business SOS -- that's Study and Organizational Skills -- was born. It helps clean and organize kids' rooms (or other study areas) so they can do homework efficiently.