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*Brazilian Au Pair, Carolina Nathan with
Logan and Sloan King
photo by Chris Fritchie*



The Au Pair Option

By Debbie Vallejo

In this article we have used assumed names for the privacy of family.

MARK AND DANIELLE KING of Frisco first began researching childcare options when their daughter, Logan, turned six months old and Danielle was looking to rejoin the workforce. They looked at the various alternatives including a nanny, in-home childcare and daycare facilities, but one in particular caught their eye – AuPairCare. AuPairCare is a designated sponsor of au pairs and specializes in matching host families with live-in childcare providers from other countries. “We wanted our daughter to take naps in her own bed, stay on her own schedule and have consistency during the week,” says Ms. King. Logan is now six years

old, and the King family is enjoying their fourth au pair since their first experience with AuPairCare several years ago.

WHAT IS AN AU PAIR?

The word “au pair” is actually French and is translated to mean “on par” or “equal to,” denoting the desired relationship between a host family and their au pair – a relationship of equal partners, not employer and employee. Au pairs are considered a part of a cultural and educational exchange program. Their hours, stipend, room and board and education are all carefully governed by the U.S. State Department. A host family must provide their au pair with a private room, as well as food and access to transportation. The au pair works no

more than 45 hours a week or 10 hours a day, and receives a stipend of \$157.95 a week. Host families pay up to \$500 a year towards mandatory education requirements; hence the educational part of the exchange program and the au pair is limited to a stay of one year. Families and their au pairs can request an extension for up to one additional year if desired. When adding up all the fees, including AuPairCare’s annual program fee of \$6985, the cost of having an au pair comes out to approximately \$300 a week.

An au pair is not to be confused with the more commonly known nanny. There are several differences between the two, cost and flexibility being a couple of the most commonly cited by host families. The au pair program offers an affordable childcare option for parents wanting in-home care and an au pair’s schedule is flexible so parents are able to take advantage of childcare on the weekends or in the evenings. Au Pairs are between the ages of 18 and 26 and are not always looking at childcare as a long-term career, but enjoy working with children and are using the au pair program as a stepping stone to further education.

Carolina Nathan is an au pair for the King’s and is originally from Brazil. “I am a nutritionist in my country and am wanting to maybe take more classes in nutrition,” explains Ms. Nathan. “I am learning better English here and love America and American culture.” Nannies do not always live with a host family, but an au pair has a private room. The nanny relationship is employer-to-employee and usually demands a little more cash flow from the employer, depending on the number of children said employer is bringing to the job. The au pair provides childcare at a flat rate, whether caring for one child or four.

There are also federal guidelines

for how au pairs are selected for the program. Heidi Woehl is the vice president of AuPairCare. "There are national requirements for au pairs," explains Ms. Woehl. "We make sure all of the au pairs are eligible for the program and screen them to make sure they are mature enough and have the qualifications to care for children. The screening is very thorough on our part, we have staff that review every au pair application." To help with the application process, AuPairCare has formed worldwide partnerships to screen potential childcare providers in other countries. "We have a network of partners all around the world," says Ms. Woehl. "They help the au pairs fill out the 20-page application and take them through the process."

FINDING AN AU PAIR

A potential host family must also fill out a lengthy application and go through a process to educate themselves on what taking part in the program means. Once in the program, the family begins looking through the database of qualified au pairs from different countries and selecting ones to interview. After making selections the host family calls a potential au pair and begins a dialogue between the two parties. The process may take several weeks from start to finish, depending on how long it takes a family to identify, interview and chose an au pair. "Families can check out as many au pairs as they want," explains Ms. Woehl. "Families know their situations best so we want the host families to have the ability to find an au pair that suits their needs."

To streamline the process, AuPairCare created its own version of online match making. The "Family Room" is an online

matching system where a family enters all their information and searches for au pairs that match their criteria. The family takes the applicants that qualify and selects some to interview. If the family would rather not utilize the online database, an

is several days long and includes CPR and first aid, as well as American culture, child development and child-rearing differences between cultures.

When asked about the matching process, Ms. King says their overall experience has been positive. "Each host family is responsible for interviewing the au pair ahead of time, but the downside is you don't get to meet them until they arrive here," says Ms. King. "But AuPairCare gives you plenty of information on each candidate, so you can best find an au pair to suit your family dynamics."

A NEW FAMILY MEMBER

When an au pair arrives at a family's doorstep, an area director for AuPairCare arrives with her. In the Frisco area that director is Judy Howard. Ms. Howard works with the host family through the application process and during the time the au pair is living in their home. "I sit down with the au pair and the host family and work through a packet we have that reiterates

all the requirements of the program," explains Ms. Howard. "We go over all state regulations plus make sure the family has clear schedules and expectations for the au pair." Communication between the two parties is key to a successful dynamic between the au pair and her family. Ms. Howard checks on all her area au pairs and host families at least once a month and is available if either needs assistance during the au pair's stay.

Part of the program that is so attractive to many host families is the idea that their children are exposed to other cultures and languages. The cultural part of the exchange program allows both families



Carolina Nathan with Danielle, Logan & Sloan King

photo by Chris Fritchie

AuPairCare service provider is available to walk them through their choices. Ms. Woehl believes their program is so successful because of their ability to match families with the right caregiver. "Ninety percent of our family and au pair matches are successful," says Ms. Woehl. "We let the families and au pairs choose each other."

After a family and au pair both agree to a partnership, AuPairCare completes all the steps and paperwork necessary for bringing the au pair to the United States. The au pair is required to participate in an orientation before beginning their time with their host family. The training

and au pairs to learn from each other. The au pair learns American culture and fine-tunes her English, while the kids are able to learn about another country and its language. Some families request au pairs from specific countries based on languages they would like their children to learn. "I have one family that requested a French au pair because they visit France every year," says Ms. Howard.

The au pair learns American culture and fine-tunes her English, while the kids are able to learn about another country and its language.

Ms. Nathan agrees with the cultural benefits of the program. "I am learning so much and really like spending time with the kids," she says. "The time I am spending here is helping me grow and learn in so many ways." The Kings love the fact that the au pair becomes a part of their family and understands the routine for each of their children. "Carolina knows how we like to do things in our home. She has adapted to our family and our way of taking care of things," explains Ms. King. "Leaving the kids alone with someone I don't know is a big fear of mine. I know Carolina because I see her interact with the kids every day."

WEIGHING THE PROS AND CONS

The au pair route doesn't work for everyone. "One drawback some may find in the program is the potential lack of privacy when you have someone else living in your house," says Ms. King. "We don't mind that. The au pair becomes a part of our family and gives the kids another resource in addition to mom and dad." Ms. King feels the positives a host family gain from the experience more than make up for loss of privacy.

There is always the possibility that a match between host family and au pair will not turn out the way either anticipated.



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When a match doesn't work out the living situation can be a little awkward until another au pair is found for the host family. "It can be hard when an au pair doesn't work out because she stays at the house until another placement or place to live is found for her," says Ms. King. "We've only had one au pair not work, but there are so many au pairs to choose from and they give you plenty of info to look through so you can find one that best suits your family."

They feel safe leaving their babies with a person living as a member of their family.

Ms. Woehl agrees that the pros of the program are enhanced by the family's ability to select their own au pair. The vast majority of issues that arise are due to cultural issues or simple personality conflicts. "About 90 percent of the matches that don't work out are due to personality differences," explains Ms. Woehl. "Usually both the host family and au pair are still great candidates for the program and so it is just a matter of re-matching them." The Kings were able to find another au pair for their children and are more than happy with the outcome.



Playtime for Carolina Nathan & King girls

photo by Chris Fritchie

FORMING A BOND

"I love getting to know the au pairs and the host families I work with," says Ms. Howard. "The au pairs make such a difference in the children's lives. Families feel good about the care their children are receiving. They feel safe leaving their babies with a person living as a member of their family." Ms. Howard sees Frisco as an ideal city for the program. "There are so many young, working families here in Frisco. Au pairs provide an affordable, safe childcare option." AuPairCare has seen an 80 percent growth in their

program over the past three years.

The choice of childcare provider is one of the most difficult and complex decisions parents make. Au pairs provide another alternative for parents seeking the best option for their family. "I would recommend the program to parents looking for a way to really know the person taking care of their children while they're at work," says Ms. King. "It has really worked for us."

Debbie Vallejo is a freelance writer living in Frisco.