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Community-based babysitting service connects Lamorinda parents with trusted caregivers

By Diane Claytor



Lamorinda Night Out founders Heather Aguiar (left) and Nicole Damhesel Photo Diane Claytor

Date night. Reservations at a romantic restaurant have been made. But wait ... who's taking care of the kids? You have a long-planned girls' night out but, just your luck, your husband had to go out of town, or you were told about a last minute business dinner you have to attend and your usual babysitter is on vacation. What are you going to do with the kids?

Nicole Damhesel and Heather Aguiar, two Lafayette residents (as well as local preschool teachers and former nannies), have the answer for you: Lamorinda Night Out.

Damhesel, the assistant director at Lafayette's Building Bridges Preschool, and Aguiar, a Building Bridges teacher, formed LMNO last year. "Working in a preschool," Aguiar explained, "we often get approached by families looking for babysitters."

She and Damhesel began talking about using their contacts and experience to "create a network of families and babysitters that we know and trust," Aguiar continued, resulting in the creation of LMNO, an organization connecting "trusted and qualified child care professionals" with families needing their services.

Both Damhesel and Aguiar are well aware of the many other sites helping families find sitters. In fact, they've even used them. But, they noted, those sites typically send you sitters you don't know. "You just have to take what you get," Damhesel said. "We thought it would be nice if there was a local service employing people from the community and convenient for both families and sitters.

"So many of the people asking us about sitters are like family to us," she continued. "We want them to have sitters they can trust, someone who is safe, reliable and responsible."

LMNO is a membership-based service. Families pay a fee - \$30 for one month, \$300 for an annual membership - and are guaranteed a sitter anytime and every time they need one. "Once a family becomes a member," Aguiar said, "they can hire one of our sitters once a month, once a week or every other day." If one of the regular LMNO sitters is unavailable, either Damhesel or Aguiar will take on the task.

Sitters are paid directly by the families and their rates, generally \$15-20 per hour, are set by LMNO, based on experience and qualifications. The entire amount goes to the sitter. "Everyone knows the rate in advance so there's none of those awkward 'how much do I owe you' conversations," Aguiar noted.

Families complete an extensive membership form, providing information on their childrens' personalities, activities and interests. "That way," Damhesel said, "we can send the most appropriate sitter for the family." She remembered one family that had a very lively, active child. "One of our sitters has three brothers so she was the perfect choice for this 'high energy' kid."

LMNO has very precise, and clearly spelled out, policies for both families and sitters. Families know there is a three-hour minimum for sitters; there may be a fee for last minute requests or cancellations; and an additional fee may be charged if multiple families are using the sitter.

Sitters are expected to spend time with the kids, or as Aguiar said, not spend time on their phones or watching TV. "We hold our sitters to a very high standard," she stated, and the policies basically spell out how they should act on the job. "We'll send sitters out with games," Damhesel added. "Or movies if parents are OK with letting their kids watch one. We want the sitters to be interacting with the kids, not sitting on the couch." Sitters must be CPR-certified before they can care for kids under the age of 10.

Potential sitters are "tested" by taking care of Damhesel's 8-year-old daughter. "She's the final approval," Damhesel said. "If I can trust my child with the person, then I'm comfortable sending him or her out to care for other families' children. My daughter also gives great feedback, letting me know if the sitter actually played with her or just watched.

"We want sitters who are serious about the job so they can give attention and love to the families they're caring for," Damhesel said. LMNO wants their families to have the security of knowing their sitter is committed and "that their children will be well cared for," she noted.

Everything is done online; membership applications and sitter request forms are on lamorindanightout.com; potential childcare providers can find application information on the website, too.

The one-year-old company remains small. "We're servicing a community, not trying to be a massive business," Aguiar explained. Damhesel continued, noting that they want LMNO to be "home grown. We've put a lot of heart and passion into this organization. We don't want to be a large babysitting chain but a small, community-based service."

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