

New nannycams put focus on child care, but be careful

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Parents looking to check up on the baby sitter have some new options. The nannycam has gone digital.

You can buy a wireless nannycam off the Internet for \$200 to \$600.

The devices are so small they can be hidden in a teddy bear or an alarm clock. The camera transmits a signal to a remote location.

But low-cost wireless cameras run the risk of transmitting signals to a stranger in the area with an identical receiver, who will then be able to see what is going on inside the home, said David Kaplan, co-owner of Moka, a closed circuit television company, based in Miami.

Another option is the web cam. They can hide in a flower pot or vase, record the nanny's action through Web-based cameras and transmit the information to an Internet site where parents can watch the nanny in real time.

Although the traditional method of setting up a camcorder and wiring it to a VCR then watching the tapes still works, it is more time-consuming than the newer technology.

And for parents who don't have time to watch the baby-sitter, there are companies that will handle everything, like the Agency for Civil Enforcement, a private investigation agency based in Boca Raton.

The firm meets with parents to discuss the suspicions they have about their nanny, and then assesses how many cameras are needed to identify whether there is a problem.

The company installs the system and if requested will provide an investigator to monitor the tapes for the parents' specific concerns and other inappropriate behavior.

Jonathan Levy, the agency's owner, said his services cost from \$300 to the thousands, depending on the size of the home, the services requested and whether the video is black and white or color.

"People think nannycams are on a witch hunt to find one abusive nanny," Levy said. "But this is a behavioral modification program where we're finding the nanny who is doing things improperly out of a lack of understanding."

Still, nannycams carry ethical concerns.

"Morally and ethically, there is always a problem with surreptitious monitoring," said David Sobel, general counsel for the Electronic Privacy Information Center in Washington, D.C. "But that doesn't mean it's illegal."

Nannycams are not illegal and any videotape acquired through the surveillance may be used in court.

However, because Florida is a two-party consent state for audio recordings, nannycams do not provide sound.

Parents also cannot place cameras in any room that would invade the nanny's privacy. Levy refuses to place cameras in bathrooms.

Deneane Maldonado, owner of Coral Springs-based Nanny Poppinz, tells potential nannies during their first interview that they will be videotaped in every home.

"If they don't like the idea of cameras, then they will not be on our staff," said Maldonado, who estimates about 70 to 75 percent of the families she serves have cameras.

'Children are the most important things in these families' lives," she said. "If they are going to be paying money for child care, the least they should do is spend money on security to see what type of child care their children are receiving."

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