



Au Pair Extraordinaire

For parents who care

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Making an au pair work

by Justine Loewenthal

The thought of having another person looking after your precious children is more than daunting! They have their own ideas about parenting and discipline, and bring different values into your home. But because of the demands of our society and of ourselves, with more and more moms having to work, the option of hiring an au pair for their children is one that many families consider. But this can be extremely liberating if parents see this decision as something they are doing for their, and their children's, benefit instead of being consumed by the guilt of not being with their children.

The option of mom working from home, so mom is also able to be with the kids (assuming an au pair is not employed to look after the kids while mom works from home), is seldom a good idea. Only if we are able to focus all of our attention on a task, can we expect the task to be done well. It is impossible to focus on a customer's needs or amend a spreadsheet while a child is whining for attention. The child becomes irritable and feels rejected, mom feels like a 'bad' mother, and mistakes will be made on the task. It's a lose-lose situation. When we are with our kids, let us be with our kids to play and connect with each other and laugh 'til our tummies hurt.

An au pair can make life more manageable in so many ways, such as:

- nurturance, care and stimulation of your children when you aren't able to be there
- transporting your children to extra murals, doctors' appointments or therapies
- supervising and helping with homework
- supervising play dates
- running errands and grocery shopping
- babysitting to give you and your spouse some much needed alone time

With all these day-to-day events out of the way, the opportunity for quality time with your children where you can be **present** can be grasped with both hands!



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It is extremely important to have an in-depth discussion with a potential au pair to make sure that your parenting ideas and hers are similar. Once you have decided to hire an au pair, a comfortable, open, light-hearted relationship between your family and the au pair is best for everyone, especially the children.

Some points to consider:

- Patience and tolerance (even more so in the early days) is vital. Take some time to show her (or him) how you would like things done – after all, although she might have valuable input, these are YOUR kids and she can't read your mind!
- Explaining to your children that they have to listen to this stranger may understandably be met with some resistance. Reinforce this time and time again. Consistency from the parents is the key to the au pair being respected as an authority figure in the eyes of the children.
- Be aware of the way in which you treat the au pair. Make sure that she knows that you value her opinion. If she does not feel valued, she is not likely to approach you if she has concerns about your child.

Be considerate of the working times and days that you agreed on initially, and don't deviate from this unless it has been discussed beforehand. The success of any relationship is based on mutual respect.

- From our experience 24 hours notice needs to be given to the au pair for any work done outside of their working hours such as babysitting or overtime.
- Although we are willing to assist the family with any issues that may arise, our experience has shown that a open communication is vital between the family and the au pair directly to prevent a breakdown in that relationship. We encourage families to have a monthly meeting where feedback can be given to both the parents and the au pair, and any potential hiccups can be sorted out.
- The au pair must attend our Powerful Child workshop – there is no cost for this. The family may also choose one other workshop, presented by Ilze van der Merwe-Alberts, for the au pair to attend at no cost.

- Ensure that discipline is consistent when you are with your children and when your au pair is. Children can be masters at manipulation!

- Children form a bond with an au pair quickly. When hiring an au pair, try to get a reasonably long-term commitment from them as replacing au pairs every few months is disruptive and emotional for children.



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As a family who employs an au pair, it is difficult to put yourself in your au pair's shoes. So, I decided to ask one of au pairs a couple of questions to give you some insight into the challenges and highlights of being an au pair.

1. What are the issues that you think au pairs misjudge when taking an au pair job for the first time?

I think that many au pairs underestimate the extent of the responsibility they will have, as well as how challenging it can be. It can be emotionally and physically draining. Inexperienced au pairs are often unaware of the impact that they have on the children and how easy it is for the children to become attached to them.

2. What are essential traits of a good au pair?

- *Patience*
- *Ability to communicate with, and work well with, parents (working as a team to ensure boundaries and discipline are followed by both parties)*
- *Understanding*
- *Kindness*
- *Punctuality*
- *Good organization skills*
- *Nurturance*
- *Love for children and not just au pairing to make money or pass time*

3. What are the traits that should be red flags for parents?

- *Impatience*
- *Lack of certainty*
- *Instability in employment or frequent change of employers*
- *Problems with punctuality*

4. What are the causes of conflict with the parents?

- *Miscommunication/lack of communication between the parents and the au pair*
- *Not following agreed upon protocols*



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- *Payment or reimbursement for any activity or errand run by the au pair*

5. What are the main concerns of an au pair?

- *The au pair may feel that they may be intruding on occasion. The goal of the au pair is not to take the parent's place, but to be a helping hand and provide nurturance and structure while parents are working.*
- *Parents may have concerns around the way that the au pair does their job, but not communicate this to the au pair.*
- *The child's results at school may not improve despite much hard work being done with the child.*

A good au pair can give parents the opportunity to have their cake and eat it too!

