

Guide to Choosing & Vetting Your Child's Caregivers

Courtesy of CJ Scarlet, aka the Badass Grandma

Introduction

The Coronavirus is wreaking havoc on everyone's lives—medically, emotionally, socially, and economically. Schools and daycare facilities are closing for weeks at a time, leaving parents scrambling to find people to watch their kids while they go to work.

The lucky ones have loving family members or caregivers already in place that they can call on. The problem is that many, if not most parents don't have a cadre of trusted people waiting in the wings who can watch their kids. Because they have to earn a living, these parents may be tempted to turn to neighbors or even (gasp!) strangers who advertise their services online.

What's a parent to do?

Well, there's a LOT they can do, actually, to ensure their kids are in safe hands. This guide to choosing and vetting your child's caregivers is an excerpt from my new book *Badass Parenting: Prepare Your Kids to Deal with Danger without Scaring the Hell Out of Them*.

I urge you to read this guide and follow the advice to ensure you're putting your kids in the hands of people who are trustworthy.¹ It's time to parent up!

Because I Said So! Or, Why You Should Listen to Me

Who on earth am I to hand out advice to parents on how to keep their kids safe? Well, I'm a victim advocate, danger expert, and author of two books on personal safety. I'm also the survivor of childhood molestations and sexual assault as a college freshman, offering me the unenviable perspective of a crime victim.

I served as executive director of a child advocacy center for abused children and as Director of Victims Issues for the NC Attorney General's Office. I also hold an interdisciplinary master's degree in human violence and continue my work with survivors of child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault; so when it comes to discussing abuse and danger, I'm considered an expert.

Finally (and most importantly), I am the doting, "Badass Grandma" to three precocious toddlers. I've helped thousands of crime victims, but when confronted with the simple innocence of my grandchildren, I felt utterly helpless. How to protect them? More importantly, how to teach them to protect themselves?

Badass Parenting is my way of doing just that, and in the process, helping YOU, the caregiver of a child, protect your loved one too.

Now, let's get to the good stuff.

¹ Disclaimer: If you follow the advice contained in this guide, you'll increase your chances of selecting trustworthy people to care for your children and minimize the chances you'll choose someone sketchy who might harm them. However, you're the ultimate decision-maker and the author is not responsible for the outcome of your choices. Use your common sense and best judgment always.

Guide to Choosing & Vetting Your Child's Caregivers

By CJ Scarlet, aka the Badass Grandma

Introduction—You're Gonna Let Me Do What?

I'm still shaking my head today.

I could hardly wait for my birthday to arrive! The year was 1972 and I counted down the days until I would be eligible to get my babysitting certificate through the Girl Scouts, which meant I could start earning money to go to the movies with my friends. I signed up for the Babysitting 101 class the day after my birthday and attended all two hours of the training (I don't remember child CPR being one of the lessons, btw). Within days I had my first babysitting gig—for an *actual* baby—and thus began my working career.

I was 11.

You read that right—11! I wouldn't trust an 11-year-old with a hamster, let alone a real human child, but many parents have and still do. The scariest part was that the woman who hired me was a complete stranger. I literally went door to door schlepping for jobs.

At one home I rang the doorbell and asked the woman who answered if she needed a sitter. She said yes and hired me on the spot (for a whopping 10 cents an hour—a fortune at the time) to watch her baby that afternoon while she ran to the store. I could have been a pint-sized psychopath for all she knew! Fortunately for all involved, I was not, in fact, a prepubescent serial killer and the baby survived my well-intentioned, if haphazard, care.

Invest the Time to Do It Right

While few people today would hire a complete stranger who showed up on their doorstep to watch their kids, many barely know the people they do end up hiring, having gotten their name from a friend, neighbor, or coworker. And most never ask for references or actually check the ones they're given if offered.

We spend waaay more time researching the latest smartphone than we do the people who are solely responsible for our children's very lives for hours or days at a time. After reading this guide, you'll know how to select and vet babysitters, nannies, daycare workers, and other child caregivers, and you'll get tremendous peace of mind from doing so. I'll also briefly cover how to prepare your "latchkey" child to care for himself if he spends time home alone.

Who Should You Trust?

You're the parent of a youngster under the age of, say, 13 and you need a caregiver so you can work and bring home the bacon. Your child's school has been shut down for the foreseeable future "out of an abundance of caution" during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Your parents have shuttered themselves in their home to keep from getting the virus themselves and your regular date night sitter, a bubble gum-popping, Tik-Toking teenager, isn't qualified or available to watch a child all day, every day for weeks on end. Plus, her folks don't want her around other people during the outbreak.

You have a few choices: there's the mom who lives next door, there's an older woman who offers sitting services whose name you got from a coworker, and there's your cousin Danny who just got out of the service and is living with his folks until he lands a job.

Who do you choose? For most people, the decision would depend solely on who's available and who answers their call first, even if that means calling Cousin Danny.²

Stop. Right. There. Now imagine the sound that godawful buzzer makes on any game show. (I don't know how to write that sound, but you get my drift.)

The CORRECT answer is the person:

- Who makes your gut (your intuitive sense) do a happy dance.
- Whose references are both favorable and reassuring.
- Who possesses the necessary skills to do the job.
- Who your child actually likes.

Let's address each of these one by one.

Making Your Gut Happy

Your gut is quite literally a second brain in your body. To assess whether someone "feels" okay or makes your tummy twinge, you have to actually meet them, yes, in person and, yes, *before* you need them to sit for you. You can't wait until you have an emergency and are desperate.

Umm, This IS an Emergency!

But this IS an emergency, you say, and you have no choice but to go to work or the bills won't get paid. Oh, and if you tried to bring your kid to work with you, your boss would have a hissy fit AND you'd likely get fired. Good point and you're right.

So, you'll need to *quickly* identify and vet potential caregivers. If you plan it right, you could do your interviews all in one day, check all their references and do background checks that evening, and have someone in place within just a day or two.

Please, take the time necessary to do this. I promise you'll sleep better at night knowing you've done your best to ensure your sweet chipmunk is in safe hands. Otherwise, you're leaving your child vulnerable to potential predators and that's simply not cool.

Back to Making Your Gut Happy

"Meeting" the caregiver is self-explanatory. If you can, meet them in person (at least one day before the sitting gig so you can check their references) because if you just talk on the phone or do a Google Hangout, you won't be able to get their vibe, meaning you won't be able to get the opinion of your gut, which is your primary and most essential tool for determining whether someone is to be trusted with the life and wellbeing of your precious gosling.

² No offense to Cousin Danny, but research shows that the VAST majority of child sex abusers are men. I'm not saying not to hire a man if he meets all the criteria AND passes the background search, but do check in with your gut and be aware that men pose a greater risk to children in general.

Checking in with your gut is a very visceral, physical act; it's about how you *feel*. "Vetting" someone is more cerebral; it's about what you *think* of them based on hard data, such as:

- HOW you know them.
- WHO they are (and whether that jives with how they represent themselves on paper or online).
- WHAT their caregiving experience is.
- WHERE else (and for whom) they've worked in the past.
- Only after you've satisfied yourself that they're qualified does the WHEN become important (i.e., are they available when you need them?).

Questions to Ask in the Initial Interview

Interestingly, most people will tell you the truth about themselves when you first meet them if you ask the right questions, which should include:

- *How long have you been caring for children?*
- *What are the ages of the kids you've cared for and how many have you cared for at one time (if you have more than one child)?*
- *Do you have children of your own? OR Do you have younger siblings you help care for? What are their ages?*
- *Do you have experience caring for children the age of my child?*
- *Tell me about the worst child you've cared for. How did you handle him/her?* This question is important because you'll be able to get a feel for her true feelings about difficult children and how she deals with them.
- *What activities do you like to do with kids?*
- *Do you have training in child CPR, first aid, and (if relevant) water safety?*
- *Have you ever had an emergency situation when you were babysitting? What happened?*
- *What's your philosophy on discipline?* This question will give you valuable insight into how someone would deal with your little monster when things get hairy. Not only will you learn how they manage tantrums, you'll also get to watch their body language and hear, in their own words, how comfortable they are talking about discipline. Are they able to clearly state their opinion on the matter? Do they squirm and seem evasive? Asking this question also offers the perfect opportunity to lay down your house rules about how you want your child to be disciplined (e.g., if spanking is okay or prohibited, how long time-outs should be, etc.).
- *Have you ever mistreated a child? What happened?* This is the #1 question parents really want to ask, but they usually don't because they don't want to be impolite or make the candidate or themselves uncomfortable. Ah, the things we do/don't do in the name of good manners! Don't be a goose. Ask the question and then wait for their answer. Don't fill an awkward silence by babbling over the question. Wait as long as it takes for them to answer and watch their body language for clues that they feel under the gun.

- *Is there anything in your background I should know about?* Ask this question and then shut up. Let them fill in the blanks; you never know what they'll admit to here.
- *Do you use drugs or alcohol* (if this is something you care about)? Watch for evasiveness or discomfort here that may indicate the person is lying. Be sure to emphasize that drugs and alcohol are forbidden when they're watching your child.
- *Have you ever been in trouble with the law?* Another great question that could yield interesting results.
- *Would you be willing to submit to a background check?* If they say no, don't hire them. Period. And for god's sake, do the background check! This is not a drill, people!
- *Can you provide a list of references I can call?* Again, if they say no, don't hire them. Everyone knows other people who can vouch for them.
- *Do you have any questions for me?*

Watch for red flags, such as: the person showing up late for the interview (which speaks to their reliability), talking badly about past clients or the children they've care for (a HUGE red flag!), acting bored or disinterested during the interview, or not responding enthusiastically when meeting your child.

Tell the candidate you'll contact her after you've had a chance to review her application and check her references. *DO NOT hire her on the spot*, no matter how much you like her! Give yourself the benefit of time and distance to think about her responses to your questions and check those references. While you may feel good during the interview, you may have niggling doubts afterward about her responses to particular questions that triggered your gut and make you think twice. *Pay attention to those feelings and trust them.*

Favorable & Reassuring References

Checking a potential caregiver's references takes a bit of extra time, but only a little, and it's one of the most important ways to determine whether this person is safe and qualified to care for your child. It's worth the trouble, so don't skip this essential step just because your friend Suzie highly recommended her. Chances are Suzie didn't check her references either!

Ask the person for at least three references (for whom she has names AND phone numbers or email addresses) from past clients, and at least two references from people who can vouch for her character *who are not immediate family members*. For teenage applicants, this could be teachers or coaches, for example.

Of course, the prospect is only going to give you the names of people she knows will say positive things about her (although that's not always the case; sometimes even glowing references say surprising things!). But you're really smart, so you're going to do a bit of detective work and get more objective information by asking the references the applicant provided to give you the names of other people she's worked for or who can speak to her character *who are not on the applicant's list*.

Here are some questions to ask references to get a solid feel for the candidate:

- *How long did this person work for you?*

- *How old was the child(ren) she cared for?*
- *What were her job duties and responsibilities?*
- *Was she reliable and dependable?*
- *Were you always able to reach her when you needed to?*
- *Why did she stop working for you (if she has)?*
- *Were you satisfied with her job performance? Why or why not?*
- *Did she ever break the house rules?*
- *Did your child seem to like her?*
- *What was your favorite thing about working with her? Your least favorite?*
- *What areas could she improve on?*
- *Would you hire her again?*
- *Do you know anyone else I can talk with who knows her? (Get their contact info if that reference has it.)*

You may be surprised by how much revealing information you garner during these calls that, combined with the feedback from your intuition, points clearly to or away from a particular candidate.

The Necessary Skills to Do the Job

People’s babysitting knowledge, skills, and abilities differ greatly. One may know child CPR, but not how to save a choking child. Another might not know either of these, but she’s willing to play “princess” with your daughter for hours on end and your child adores her.

When assessing how young is too young for someone to watch your child, take into consideration the candidate’s past babysitting experience with siblings or other clients, her level of maturity, whether she’s had formal babysitting training, and whether you feel you can trust her to handle an emergency.

If you do hire a teenager, you need to make it crystal clear that she may *never* have people over (especially boyfriends) when she’s on the job. At best, they’d be a distraction from your child; at worst, their guest could be a threat to your child. Also state your rules on if and when she can engage in phone calls and texts and use social media while working (after the kids are asleep, for example).

It can help to make a wish list of the skills and abilities you’d like to have in an ideal caregiver, and rank those from “essential to have” to “nice to have.” Don’t compromise on the items you list as essential; the person either does or doesn’t have those skills and you shouldn’t overlook their absence just because you “have a really good feeling” about someone.

Some things you might want to have on your “essentials” list:

- Prior child caregiving experience with kids around your child’s age.
- Training in child CPR and first aid.
- A connection with your child, meaning they like each other.
- References who say they would hire that person again.

The great news is, you're not hiring an admin assistant, so if you find multiple candidates who pass the interview and vetting process like the bosses they are, you can add them all to your list of trusted caregivers.

Factor in Your Child's Intuition

Kids have a great intuitive sense of who feels safe and who doesn't. Always introduce your child to a prospective caregiver when they come to your home for the interview and carefully watch how they interact. You're looking for the person to engage with your child by being friendly and asking her questions that are appropriate for your child's age and maturity level. On the flip side, you're watching to see how your child reacts to the person's attempts to engage her. If she reacts negatively, that's a clue they might not be a good fit for each other.

If your child reacts positively, it doesn't necessarily mean she likes or trusts the person; she could just be "making nice" in the moment. Regardless, you'll want to talk with your child after each interview to get her take on the candidates. Validate her intuition and act on it, either by rejecting that person as a candidate or bumping them up to the next level (checking their references).

If your child is naturally shy, or if she's angry because she's going through a "stage" or doesn't believe she needs a caregiver at all, it'll be more difficult to get a true reading of her take on the person. You can learn a lot just by watching how the applicant reacts to your shy or hostile kid, preferably by trying to draw her out with questions and offering ways to entertain her.

Doing the Background Check

Yes, you MUST do a background check on the person(s) you're considering hiring! I can't tell you how many people have learned their kids were abused by supposed "trusted" caregivers who turned out to have a criminal record—something the parents would have discovered in minutes if they'd invested any time looking into their backgrounds.

A good background check service only costs around \$20 and will tell you if the person you're researching has any criminal convictions or is on the sex offender registry.³ Speaking of which, take just a few minutes and do your own search of their name on the National Sex Offender Registry (www.nsopw.gov) and your state's sex offender registry (Google it).

Note: Know that you'll want to get the person's permission first before you do the background check on them. If they refuse to offer their permission, that's a solid clue they're not to be trusted. Don't let them anywhere near your child.

Please be sure you're looking up the right person. Ask them for the correct spelling of their full legal name, and their full address and birthdate to help you narrow the search to the correct individual.

But don't rely just on a background search; after all, the person may never have been caught and so there will be nothing on the record. An intuitive hit is your most important clue; trust it. Soooo so many people have nagging feelings they can't quite silence, no matter how they try,

³ If you're interviewing multiple candidates, you can purchase a monthly subscription for around \$30 that you can cancel after that first month.

that whisper to them that something's not right about the person they're considering for a caregiving job. They tell themselves it's nothing; that they're imagining things or being overly sensitive when the person says or does something that seems "off."

I can't emphasize it strongly enough—Trust. Your. Intuition! And then *act on it* by not hiring anyone you're not 100 percent comfortable with.

Monitoring the Caregiver

So, you've carefully vetted a number of potential caregivers and chosen the best candidate. You rock! You can feel great knowing you're leaving your snookums in the care of someone who will take care of him as if he were their own.

Now, in advance of the first sitting gig, it's time to create a list for the caregiver of your house rules and important information she might need when she cares for your child, such as:

- Your contact information (where you can most quickly be reached).
- A list of emergency contacts.
- Your house address and home phone number.
- Your child's food preferences and sensitivities.
- Authorization for the caregiver to obtain medical care for your child and medical insurance information.
- Allowable amount of screen time your child can enjoy.
- Bedtime rules and rituals.
- Must Do's (e.g. give your child his medication) and Never Do's (e.g., smoking or vaping or having guests over while on the job).

This obviously isn't a comprehensive list. Because I'm a super nice person, I've created a couple of handy forms you can print and fill out that contain all that information so it's easy for your caregiver to access. To download the forms, go to my website at www.cjscarlet.com/freebies/.

Be sure you've walked the caregiver through the house rules and the caregiver information list each time before you leave the house. Keep the list on the fridge so it's handy if she needs it.

When Your Child is Home Alone

According to *America After 3PM*, published by the Afterschool Alliance and JC Penney Afterschool, more than 15 million kids take care of themselves after school until their parents get home. Millions more will be doing so during the day until this pandemic is over.

Before you get all judgy, consider that many parents, especially single parents, don't have access to affordable childcare. Some don't have extra money for anything beyond rent and food. Some parents just don't have a choice.

Personally, I squirm when I think of little kids sitting in a state of high anxiety while they wait for something terrible to happen in their parents' absence. My oldest son has never forgiven me for leaving him home alone for two hours while I took a college final exam when he was young. He brings it up all the time. I mean like, *all the time*. It was a terrible, risky move on my part, but in my defense, I was an idiot.

Please don't leave your young child home alone. Do everything in your power to find and afford childcare for her so you both can rest easy. Generally, children older than 13 can handle being alone for short periods. For kids between 10 and 12, it depends on their level of maturity and responsibility. For example, is your child comfortable being alone or is she terrified? Does she know what to do and who to call for help if something does happen? Can she handle an emergency situation if, for example, she cut herself while preparing a snack?

Here are some suggestions to keep your sweetheart safe when she's home alone, and some scenarios you need to train her to deal with. Ask her how she would handle each situation and tweak her answers, as needed:

- Get one of those smart locks and security cameras from a good home security company so you can use your phone to keep an eye out when she leaves the house and returns.
- Teach her not to enter the house if something doesn't look or feel right (e.g., the door is ajar, there's a broken window, etc.).
- Ensure she has a backup plan, such as going to a trusted neighbor's house and calling the police, if something looks or feels wonky.
- Tell your child not to answer the house phone unless it's you calling.
- Teach your child to never, never, never EVER let someone in the house, even if they claim you sent them to pick her up (unless they know the code word you and your child agreed upon ahead of time, which I describe in my book, *Badass Parenting*) or they ask to use the phone because there's been an accident (or other potentially bogus claim). If someone persists in trying to get it, she should call the police.
- Before you ever leave your child home alone, make sure she knows basic first aid, fire safety, and how to call 911 in the event of an emergency.
- Write down your home address and landline number; your cell phone number; your company's name, address, and number; and the information for emergency contacts if you can't be reached. Post this information on the fridge where she can find it easily. (You can use the same Caregiver checklist I offer on my website at www.cjscarlet.com/freebies/.)

Your child is basically serving as her own sitter, so make sure she knows everything you would expect a regular caregiver to know. Write down the rules she's expected to follow, such as not having anyone over, how much screen time she can have, whether she has to do her school or homework before you get home, whether she's allowed to use the stove, what snacks are allowed, etc. Post these on the fridge too.

Parent Up!

The time you spend ensuring your kid's caregivers are safe will give you peace of mind and help you sleep better at night, knowing you've done everything in your power to protect your child. I'm mean, who wants to admit they've done a half-assed job protecting their kid? Parent up!

I hope you enjoyed this guide and found it helpful. Now go forth and be the parent your child deserves!

About the Author



CJ Scarlet, aka the “Badass Grandma,” is a danger expert, victim advocate, and crime survivor herself. CJ has given speeches and workshops at national and international events; and has appeared on numerous radio and television programs, including *MSNBC* and *NPR*. Her books include *Badass Parenting* and the award-winning *Badass Girl’s Guide: Uncommon Strategies to Outwit Predators*.

The former U.S. Marine photojournalist and forest firefighter holds an interdisciplinary master’s degree in human violence from Old Dominion University. Named one of the “Happy 100” people on the planet, CJ’s story of triumph over adversity is featured in two bestselling books, including *Happy for No Reason* and *Be Invincible*.

Share This Guide!

Please share this *Guide to Choosing & Vetting Your Child’s Caregivers* with other parents on social media to encourage them to read it so they can protect their children too.

About Badass Parenting

“Badass Parenting is like a triple-dark chocolate cheesecake, with a layer of mousse in the middle (hint: the mousse is CJ Scarlet’s humor and style - which helps lighten up the cheesecake!). You will love this book!” Karen Christie, Grandma

Shameless plug: If you enjoyed this guide, you’ll LOVE *Badass Parenting: Prepare Your Kids to Deal with Danger without Scaring the Hell Out of Them*. To pre-order the book or get access to FREE parenting resources, sign up for updates on her website at www.cjscarlet.com.

Badass Parenting teaches parents how to empower their kids from birth to age 9 to avoid dangerous people and handle themselves in scary situations ranging from bullying and digital dangers to sexual abuse and kidnapping.

Edgy, funny, and irreverent, this unputdownable book (with TONS of downloadable bonus content!) is the new bible for parents looking to raise safe, savvy, confident kids.

To reach CJ Scarlet for media inquiries and speaking opportunities, contact her at cj@cjscarlet.com.

Connect with CJ Scarlet

Facebook: www.facebook.com/cjscarletauthor

Instagram: @cj.scarlet

Twitter: @cjscarlet

Pinterest: www.pinterest.com/cjscarletauthor

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/cjscarlet