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Nanny shortage could create a crisis as families return to work

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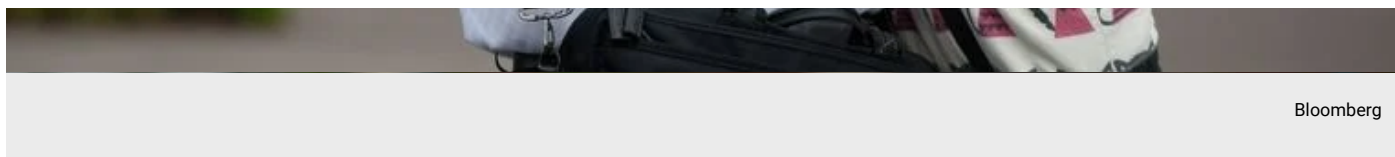
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As professional parents prepare to return to the office, their sudden need for child care has opened the job spigot for nannies that had been dry for more than a year.

“Demand for help now is off the charts,” said Jaime Hochhauser, co-founder of HomeFront Lifestyle Staffing, a headhunting firm for nannies, housekeepers and chefs, among other private employees.

Although domestic employers are offering better benefits and higher pay, the nannies who used to take care of their children are not immediately flocking back to work, those in the industry say. If working parents are unable to secure help with kids by September, when many offices have said they will reopen, parents' inability to leave home could slow fall's back-to-work momentum and shepherd in a third chaotic year for city workers with children.

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Already labor force participation among mothers shows the marks of school closures, layoffs and personal risk calculations that deemed it too risky to have a caretaker in their homes. In April, 1.5 million fewer moms were **working** than in February 2020, according to the U.S. Census, a larger drop than among fathers or employees without kids.

The nanny shortage began when New York closed because of Covid-19. Families with domestic staff often offered them a choice, said April Berube, the owner and founder of the Wellington Agency. Child care workers had to move in with the families of the children they cared for or be fired. That worked at first, Berube said, but among her

clients, most of the relationships had fizzled by May.

As far as clients calling for new placements, she said, “**New York was completely dead.** There wasn’t a single call.”

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Families that Berube works with had either left the city for their larger second homes or sought to spend the year in places with warmer weather or fewer pandemic-related restrictions. Hochhauser said she placed a few nannies, but those placements were only for live-in positions. One family rented an apartment in its building for a nanny to stay, she said.

Parents realize their **child care** set-up must be robust enough to cover the busy work-life engagements of a two-career family and accommodate potential quarantines for Covid-19 exposures or remote-schooling days. New York state has not released final guidelines for health rules at schools.

At the beginning of July, Berube said, she started getting around 10 calls a day, compared to normal summers, when there might just be a handful of new calls a week. Berube, who also places staff in Florida, said she recognizes the crunch. It’s exactly what happened there in September, when she was getting more than 100 requests a month and making around 30 placements, far more than typical. Salaries in Florida, she said, went from a standard of about \$28 an hour for a housekeeper to \$100,000 a year offers, sometimes with fully paid health coverage and more paid holidays—even full summers off.

But in New York right now, there are **few candidates**. Hochhauser said that some people

found positions closer to where they live, and others pursued new careers as disparate as nursing and graphic design. Those with their own children face the same uncertainties around school and child care as their employers, so they can't commit to the long days that many working families require. Still others are visiting their families overseas.

"My hope is that they're traveling for the summer," Hochhauser said, and will return in the fall.

To improve their chances, Hochhauser said, she tells families to move fast and raise their salary offers.

"I have four nannies right now who are looking for jobs," she said. "They are each interviewing with 14 families—they can choose whatever they want, if one family seems nicer or is offering \$35 an hour."

Hochhauser said she has offered \$500 bonuses to current workers for referrals, and she is looking to recruit potential nannies wherever she can. Because her business depends on her reputation and relationship with clients, she said, she is unwilling to lower the standards for an applicant.

Previously, she guaranteed clients that if a nanny did not work out after three months, she would find a replacement. She no longer makes that guarantee.

Letter

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