

# The comfort of strangers

Will she run up a huge phone bill and trash the tumble drier, or turn out to be a treasure? **Andrew Don** on whether to have an au pair

**A**u pair. Apart from "mother-in-law", few phrases pertaining to family life conjure as many connotations of off-colour humour. To say that so-and-so "ran off with the au pair", for instance, sounds like part of the plot of a low-rent sitcom. But does it all arise out of a real but unacknowledged embarrassment? How else could we feel about inviting another, younger adult into our homes – as part-guest, part-servant, part-child-minder – who becomes witness to our domestic dramas? Au pairing is odd when you think about it.

And yet, it is crucial – vital for the sanity and smooth operation of many households, especially those on a limited budget and/or with two working parents. It is not surprising, then, that there's a demand: about 15,000 17- to 27-year-olds come to the UK each year to take up placements with families.

The Home Office allows au pairs to stay for up to two years, working up to

25 hours a week (with at least two free days a week). Food and lodging are provided by the family, and employers can provide up to two nights of baby-sitting a week for a recommended fee of £45-£50 that acts as "pocket money". When everything goes according to plan, that is...

June Edwards soon discovered that, instead of helping with the children and the housework, her au pair preferred playing computer games. "It was like having another kid in the house. I told her she had to do the ironing," she says. Edwards, a mother of three from Bitteswell in Leicestershire, welcomes the company of her current au pair when her husband works away, but admits that it takes time to build a relationship: "You have to work hard with them for the first few weeks to make sure they know how to use domestic appliances, otherwise you end up with everything broken. If they are trying to do the laundry, you have to make sure it is done correctly – otherwise they boil everything."

When the Sassoon family from Elstree, Hertfordshire, came home to find their new au pair on the phone, they thought it was a sign that she had settled in. Alarm bells rang, however, when they realised it was not just the occasional call. Talking to her boyfriend at home via his mobile, she had run up a £200 debt. Her outraged father had to refund the Sassoons.

The family now have an au pair from the Czech Republic who dotes on their two children, but it is no surprise that parents fret over finding a trustworthy au pair. Some go to agencies, while others take recommendations from friends or advertise in *The Lady*. The country's 600 au pair agencies used to have to be licensed, but after government deregulation in 1995 this was no longer a requirement.

Despite the number of au pairs visiting the UK every year, the International Au Pair Association has only 22 UK agencies which are members. With the recent launch of The British Au Pair Agencies' Association (BAPAA), which aims to raise standards, there are hopes that these concerns will be addressed. Parents are advised that a non-affiliated agency does not mean they are not reputable, but, as many people have discovered, it is difficult to tell the good from the bad.

But what's in it for the au pairs? They are required to study English, of course, but what else do they get out of it? According to Karen Hopwood, proprietor of A-One Au Pairs and Nannies in Andover, Hampshire: "Au pairs live in because it is a cultural exchange and they come to learn about family life in the UK."

June Edwards also believes that the situation can be culturally enriching for both parties: one of her au pairs not only learned English, but taught her youngest son Croatian.

To add to the complexity, a family must contend with the fact that there are now two different types. Put simply, an au pair can come from the European Union (EU) or the European Economic Area (EEA). The government added Bulgaria, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to the permitted list last December. Whereas, an "au pair plus" must come from the EU, and will work for 30-35 hours a week for extra money. For the extra time they work beyond their standard 25 hours, a rate of £2.50 an hour is considered reasonable.

Cheap at the price, you would think. But to some extent, says Rachel Velenski, a mother of two girls from Finchley, north London, you get what you pay for. She works two mornings a week and finds that her au pair gives



Happy family... (left to right) Mark and Lisa Sassoon, Joshua and Mia and

her flexibility. The catch, though, is that au pairs only last between six months to a year. Valenski explains how when girls first arrive from Eastern Europe they give 100%: "After about six months, as they get used to the way of life, they get more flippant and do not work as well."

Recognising that there can be problems with having an unknown person moving into the family home, Lindsay Doughty, director of Midshires Au Pair Bureau in Broughton Astley, Leicestershire, says: "It is hard enough for these girls having a different language, so we try to match them." A common example is pairing vegetarians with vegetarian families.

"You have someone sharing your home. That takes an adjustment and you may find you don't have the privacy you used to have," says Doughty. "But if you make an au pair's room comfortable, you will get your space."

Some families, especially in London, opt for a "live-out au pair". Although, technically, they are not au pairs, these young people tend to link up with others to rent accommodation together and receive a wage of about

£80 a week. They will work for up to 20 hours a week with families on a student visa, or up to 25 hours a week on a working holidaymaker's visa. The latter are only open to Commonwealth citizens or those from British Dependent Territories. But virtually any national can apply for a student visa if they enrol for a minimum of 15 hours a week of study.

So is there any truth in the tired old ribaldry about au pairs? "There have been a couple of incidents of fathers who have run off with the au pair," concedes Doughty. "They were probably menopausal."

Occasionally, though, the boot is on the other foot. One male au pair – they account for an estimated 5-10% of the market – fell in love with the mother. "And they ran off into the sunset."

Not all husbands like male au pairs – for other reasons. "I think they are afraid the children may start calling him daddy," says Doughty. But she has had several male au pairs in her own home. "I've a son of nine and they relate brilliantly. They do the housework, the ironing and play football with them in the park."

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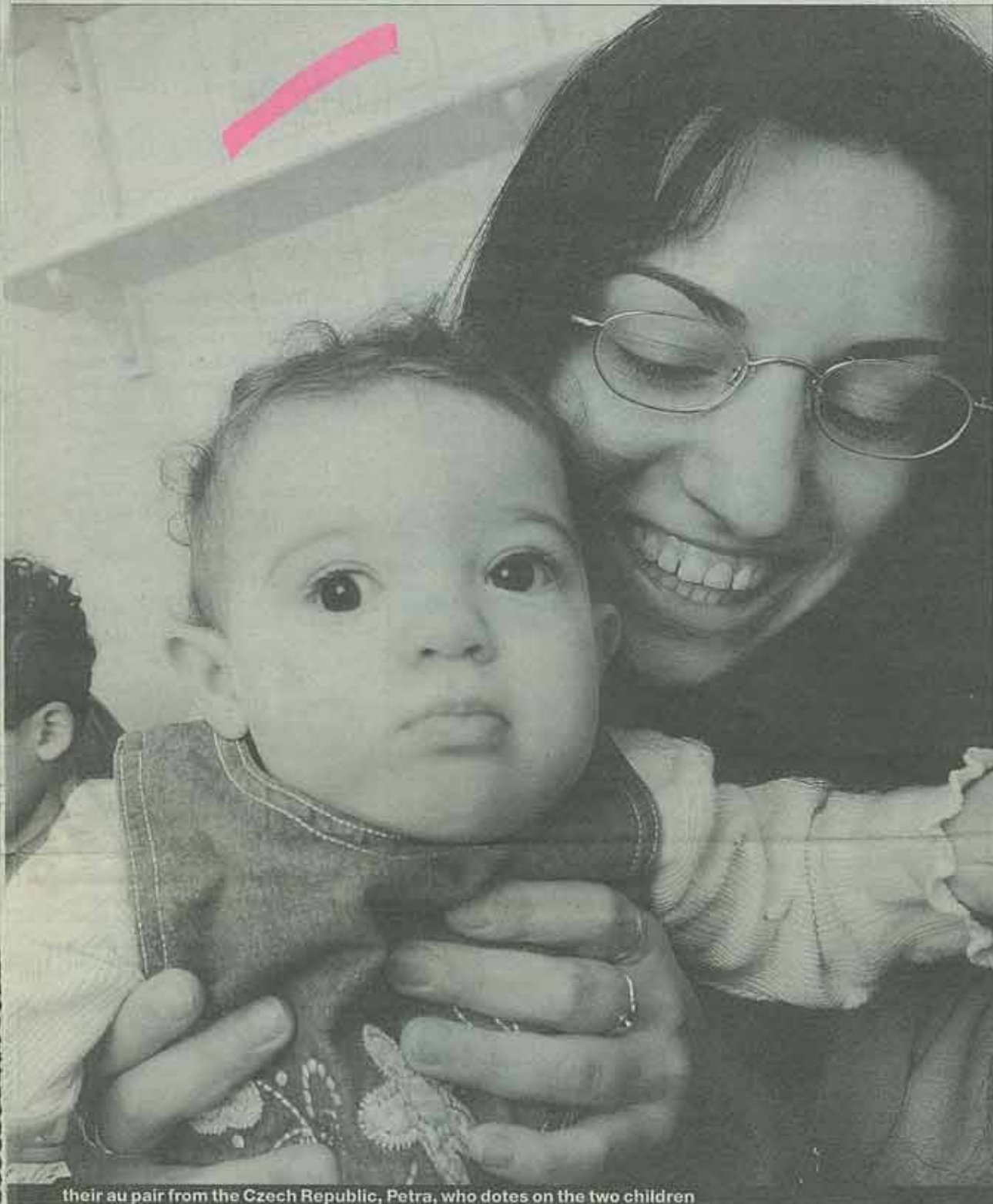
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PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID LEVENE



their au pair from the Czech Republic, Petra, who dotes on the two children

## Mind the gap



When a child is diagnosed as autistic, there is no point wishing for a cure. Acceptance is the only way to cope

I've been talking to a woman whose son has been diagnosed as autistic. He is her only child. Like my George, as a baby he was so attractive - almost magnetic. He seemed exceptionally bright; gifted, even. Now he's three and a half, and she's watching in dismay as he undergoes a classic autistic regression, losing the skills of which she had been so proud.

Should she go ahead and have the second child she'd always planned? She knows there's a real chance she might have another autistic. After our first two sons were both found to be autistic, we had genetic counselling at the Maudsley Hospital. They estimated the chances of it happening a third time as one in twenty. But this is only an estimate; the genetic component of the condition isn't fully understood. We took the risk, and I'm very glad we did, because in addition to George and Sam I now have my almost pathologically un-autistic Jake.

My caller was wondering whether she could cope with another child with such complex and exhausting needs. But I suspect that what she was most frightened of was "losing" another child to autism, of being forced to relinquish her hopes for the child she thought she had in the face of mounting evidence of abnormality.

Few parents know they have an autistic baby. I didn't; nothing was spotted by any of the health professionals who dealt with George and Sam. It is only with the benefit of hindsight and the experience of Jake that I can recognise that my first two babies were, indeed, born autistic. The condition takes a while to show its true colours. Unlike a physically obvious condition, such as Down's syndrome, autism can only be diagnosed by behavioural observation. With a young baby, you'd have to be extremely clued up to know what to observe.

This means that most parents have months, even years, of false belief about their child. The extreme physical attractiveness of many autistic infants can add to the impression that a marvellous, normal child had been somehow "lost". For some parents, the process of grieving for the child you thought you had takes years to complete. There's a nagging residual feeling that the child could snap out of it; you almost wonder, sometimes, whether they're just putting it on. Documentary-maker Saskia Baron's autistic brother

Timothy is now in his 40s. Her recurring childhood fantasy was that he was some kind of spy, just acting his autism, and that one day he would unmask himself.

This fantasy was fed by moments - or hours, or even days - when Tim would suddenly seem a lot more normal. He'd always return to his autistic ways, but these flashes gave the misleading impression that there was a "real" Tim inside, that you only had to find the right key to let him out. All of us who deal with autists have experienced this. Out of the blue you get some great eye contact, some clear and meaningful speech, even some action which feels empathetic. Sam is not very verbal and is usually emotionally aloof or indifferent, but once, when George was upset he went over to his brother and patted him on the head. "Don't cry, Georgie sweetheart," he said.

Autists who've written autobiographical accounts describe occasions when the mists lift, when the neurotypical world suddenly seems to make more sense. But, like most autistic experiences, such moments are only fragments. Autists can learn some coping strategies, but their condition will never be "cured". And the rest of us must learn to stop wishing for a cure. Acceptance is all.

That natural early assumption that your baby is normal affects a lot of things. Many parents choose mainstream school for their rising-fives because they haven't shaken off the impression that a mainstream child is what they have. Inclusion in the mainstream rarely works, but it takes some of us years to understand that "special needs" means exactly what it says.

I wasted a great deal of time with my two, thinking they were only "mildly" affected. They're not. They're both profoundly handicapped, both George, the "gifted" baby, and Sam, the cheery toddler. If I had my time again, I'd intervene straight away with a gluten-free, casein-free, additive-free diet, and as much interventionist behavioural therapy as I could manage. I'd keep them out of mainstream school until I was certain they were ready for it - and I'd try to accept that that day might never come. And yes, I'd go for that next pregnancy. No question.

Charlotte Moore

## 'The youngest one poured water into my shoes'

Ales Matl, 26, from the Czech Republic, has been in the UK for 14 months, and has been with his most recent family in Locks Heath, Hampshire, since May. "I wanted to learn English and there was no opportunity at home to improve what I already knew."

He works five hours a day with baby-sitting on top. His duties include domestic chores, such as tidying, washing and cleaning the house and he looks after four children aged 4-13.

"It took two months before the children started to trust me. They had warmed to other au pairs whom they had got used to. I started carefully and slowly and I gave them the chance to test me."

His initial experience sounds like something from the Sound of Music. "They sometimes hid their shoes when they went to school so they went wearing trainers. The

youngest one poured water into my shoes. Their mother told them off when she found out."

Matl had little experience of childcare before he became an au pair, and he hopes his English, which is now fluent, will help him secure a good job when he returns home.

"I like children. I had a good childhood myself and I got lots of love, so I have experience of how to do it properly. I hope when I get home I will get a job in computers, the law or economics."

Galina Hosbrodskova, 21, also from the Czech Republic, has worked as an au pair for Midshires Au Pair Bureau since mid-January, where her experience has been a happy one.

She says £50 a week plus food and accommodation is more than she would get at home without qualifications. But two other families she worked for proved an ordeal:

"One just wanted me to work seven

days a week and 24 hours a day. When I gave them notice that I was leaving, they were angry and kicked me out at midnight with 50p in my pocket. I was sitting on my luggage in front of the house wondering what I could do."

She has no parents and had no one to fall back on. "I had a return ticket home and someone at the coach station offered to pay my fare to London so I could fly home."

She could not get a job so she came back only to have another bad experience. After she left her second job, her boyfriend looked up au pair agencies in Yellow Pages and called Midshires. "The director of the agency [Lindsay Doughty] asked me if I wanted to be her au pair. Now I am happy. It is how it is supposed to be."

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