

Detente With the Babysitter

By DANIELLE FLOOD

THE CHARACTERS: The Mother. The Father. The Babysitter, age 16. The Daughter, age 6. Scene One — The Mother and Father on the front seat of a car on the Merritt Parkway early Saturday night

The Mother: "Do you think that girl is O.K., Hubert? Did you see those records she brought? She had The Beatles' white album. Hubert they listen to that album loud. If Amy starts crying she's not going to hear her. I'm calling the house as soon as we get to the Newtons."

Scene Two — The Babysitter peering into the refrigerator in the house of the Mother and Father.

The Babysitter: (thinks) "How does she stay so skinny? You can tell about people from their refrigerators. Refrigerators and medicine cabinets. Meatloaf, lettuce and mayo on date nut. That's it. What's in the refrigerator where Grace is?" (She turns and dials on the wall phone.)

Scene Three—The Daughter standing behind dresses in the Mother's bedroom closet.

The Daughter: (thinks) "How long can I stand this before she notices I'm gone? She'll be nervous. Serves her right. Then she'll play cards. Too easy here. She'll find me. She'll never find me outside. The back seat of the other car."

To make a short play shorter, suffice it to say that the Daughter falls asleep in the back seat of the other car, the Babysitter spends most of the night talking to Grace and the Mother keeps dialing and getting a busy signal.

The busy signal is what this story is about, because in many instances that is what you absorb as you learn of what mothers and fathers and children have to say about babysitters and what babysitters have to say about mothers and fathers and children.

Buzz. Pause. Buzz. Pause. Buzz. Pause. Tune into the current state of babysitting and you can often see, smell, taste and feel a busy signal.

When one Fairfield babysitter, Leah, 16, who asked for a pseudonym that happens to mean "the weary," arrives at a house where she sits frequently, she is usually confronted by "one kid, about 9, half the time he's in army uniform, he's watching war movies and he's playing with guns and he points a gun at you and says 'bang, bang, you're dead' and all sorts of quote normal unquote things that are really bad."

The boy is one of five children in

this family. The ages of the other children are 2, 4, 5 and 11. "You're more active when there are more kids," says Leah. "They're all over the place and you have to make sure they're not breaking something or anything. I think I deserve more money than \$1 an hour." (Diane Ryan, of Greenwich, agrees and notes "a dollar isn't as much as it used to be.")

The mother wants Leah to read to the children, which Leah likes to do. "But they're usually too impatient. They just want to look at the picture on TV. The lady wants me to read to them and they don't understand what I'm saying and I don't understand why she wants me to read to them."

But Leah reads. Only, "the books have stereotypes in them: the mother will be in the kitchen, the father will be reading the newspapers, sister will be playing with her dolly and brother playing with trains or the dogs. This is not always the case, but a lot of the time it is.

"Usually I skip over the bad stuff. I don't know if it's right. I think it's right. I don't want them taught stereotypes."

She says the worst part of the night is getting the kids to bed. "They'll jump around all over the bed. I let them scream. That's what the lady said. Sometimes the baby doesn't stay in the crib. Sometimes she screams 10 minutes and she quits."

Leah gets hungry. "It's not their duty," she says of employers offering food, "but I'd like that. Not 'Here's the tea and here's the bread,' though." Leah would like to babysit for "people who trust you by yourself."

She says she would love to tell this family she doesn't want to sit for them anymore. "I feel like I'm being used. Definitely. But I think they need me."

"Desperately" is how some mothers need babysitters sometimes, says Kathy DiGiovanna of Milbrook, mother of four, ages 6 through 12. "Sometimes you don't have a choice," she says.

"I've had the eaters, the horrible eaters. In an hour the fat girl across the street ate two cakes."

She says the worst babysitters complain about "the horrible things" the children have done instead of keeping them from doing them.

And then there are those "Times," with a capital T:

Like the time Mrs. DiGiovanna discovered that in two hours, the sitter, 13, had rearranged her living and dining rooms.

The time a Fairfield mother heard a sitter say she was sorry she was half an hour late but that God was in her living room.

The time Neil and Leba Sedaka of Westport happened upon their sitter, 19, standing in two feet of water in the lower level of their house because she had "indulged in a little smoking" and forgotten to turn off a faucet.

The time the mother of two in Old Greenwich found her "sensitive" sitter had locked her children out of the house because she couldn't take teasing.

Which brings us to . . . Tell it Carole Greenberg of Old Greenwich: "Television. I don't like the kids to sit in front of something for hours at a time and

have some machine entertain them. I feel it's important for them to learn how not to depend on a mechanical device."

One person's scourge is another's solution. Howard Jacobson, a Fairfield father of three, suggests a babysitter you don't have to pay, feed, take home and that "isn't on the phone all night."

"A television camera, looking on the kid while the kid is watching another set and you just plug your set in where you happen to be. Telesitting!"

Mr. Jacobson's daughter, 8, says the best babysitters are "the ones who let you do anything you want." ■