

How to Speak Nanny



Michael Falco for The New York Times

HOME WORK Alex Borinstein gets schoolwork help from Jenny Flores, who was hired by his mother, Hilary Vartanian, rear, when he was a baby.

By HILARY STOUT

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THE mother was annoyed with her nanny, and she went on the Web to vent. The nanny had fed the children a casserole that the mother had intended to serve for dinner. "Now I have to come up with something else," she wrote on a popular site for mothers, exasperation radiating from the computer screen.

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Michael Falco for The New York Times

DIRECT APPROACH Over the years, Hilary Vartanian, left, has become more frank with her son's nanny, Jenny Flores, right, who has cared for him since he was 3 months old.

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She might have been looking for sympathy, but she didn't get much. Responses from other mothers to her query about whether they, too, would be irritated ranged from "If you didn't tell her it was supposed to be for dinner, there's no grounds for being annoyed" to "You're a loon."

But one really got to the heart of the matter: "A lot of you nanny employers are really bad at employer-employee communications."

It's true. Pop culture — stoked by the movie and the best-selling novel "The Nanny Diaries" and now by the newly published sequel, "Nanny Returns" — tends to paint mothers who employ nannies as over-entitled she-devils who pepper their hapless employees with unreasonable orders and micromanage them to the brink of nervous breakdowns. But the reality is different and more curious.

Many mothers who employ nannies are actually overstretched working women, a number of whom (contrary to their professional personas) suffer from an inability to clearly express their expectations and demands to the people they pay to care for their children. The result is a peculiar passive-aggressive form of communication, a less-than-ideal dynamic between worker and boss.

The mother, at times beset by guilt, a touch of intimidation or feelings of her own maternal inadequacy, fails to articulate what she wants from the nanny — and then complains to friends, her spouse or an Internet message board when she doesn't get it. (The father in many cases steers clear of the whole relationship.)

Lisa Spiegel, a director of Soho Parenting, a family counseling center in Manhattan that tends to cater to urban professionals, witnesses such communication issues all the time. "I've seen C.E.O.'s, heads of companies, professors," she said. "These are women who are very successful in work relationships, but the idea of talking to their baby sitter about unloading the dishwasher will give them cramps for a week."

Some nascent efforts are beginning to emerge to address this puzzling communication gap. One approach seeks to empower the nanny to take the initiative and draw out the mother on her needs and wants. "The communication needs to be there, and if it's not being initiated by the parents, it has to be initiated by the nanny," said Lora Brawley, who lives outside Seattle and is the president of the National Association for Nanny Care, a nonprofit educational organization that aims to promote excellence in nanny care.

A nanny training school, accredited by the New York State Department of Education, opened in Manhattan a few months ago and has placed this philosophy at the heart of its curriculum, right up there with CPR and child development. A major aim of the school, called the Absolute Best Care Nanny Learning Center, an offshoot of a nanny-placement agency by a similar name, is to coach nannies on how to figure out what on earth families really want. (The simple answer: ask.)

"This is a game changer," said Douglas Kozinn, the president of the company that runs both agency and school.

For as long as she has employed a nanny (almost 10 years now), Eileen Hershenov, a lawyer from Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., has had day jobs running the legal departments of large nonprofit groups. "I'm really used to having employees," she said. "I've hired people, I've fired people. I've gone through on-the-job training and formal training on how to communicate with your reports."

But, she said, the corporate training "didn't translate over" to talking with her nanny.

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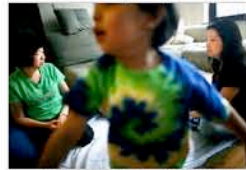
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"It's never been easy," Ms. Hershenov sighed. "It's an employer-employee relationship, but it's also in your home — and with someone who is taking care of your most cherished relations."



Yana Paskova for The New York Times

INDIRECT APPROACH Jackie Quan, right, was surprised when her children's nanny, known as Auntie Lan, left, trimmed the hair of Ms. Quan's son, Jefferson Lin, center. Instead of telling her not to do it again, Ms. Quan said, she gave her a look that she hoped got her point across.



John Klinker for The New York Times

IN TRAINING Carolyn Kavanaugh, a co-director of Northwest Nannies Inc., oversees a class of prospective nannies whose bodies were traced on paper as part of a self-awareness exercise.

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Plus, she said, "I'm asking for exactly the things I can't ask for in the office — to do something for the kids, something personal, pick up something."

Carolyn Kavanaugh, a director of Northwest Nannies Inc. in Portland, Ore., which runs a nanny-training institute and a placement agency, recalls a telephone call she received from a mother asking if it was acceptable to ask her nanny to do the children's laundry as part of her job. Yes, Ms. Kavanaugh said, children's laundry is a typical part of a nanny's job. The mother reported that she told the nanny, "If you have time, would you mind doing the children's laundry?" The nanny apparently had not had time. The laundry remained undone.

Ms. Kavanaugh said that she explained to the mother that she had to be more direct and tell the nanny that doing the laundry was part of her job. "This was a brilliant woman, an attorney," Ms. Kavanaugh recalled. But her response was a timid and uncertain: "Oh. All right, I guess."

Speaking of laundry, Ms. Kavanaugh recounted the tale of another mother who told a nanny that everything was going "great." But when the agency called to see how things were working out, the mother had a list of complaints, including that the nanny wasn't folding the laundry right. Asked if she had told the nanny that she'd prefer that the clothes be folded a different way, the woman said: "No, I didn't think I had to. Doesn't she see that I refold them?"

The problem that employers have in stating what they want from nannies has provided a business opportunity for companies that think they might be able to help. In Boston, a 23-year-old nanny-placement agency called In Search of Nanny started offering consulting and communication training two years ago for nannies and parents to help them better manage their relationship.

In the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut area, Gold Parent Coaching of Short Hills, N.J., one of many consulting businesses that have sprung up in recent years to counsel parents on how to handle everything from a baby who won't go to sleep to a toddler's tantrums, has increasingly branched out into a new service: mediating the parent-nanny relationship. Tammy Gold, the owner, brings her experience as a psychotherapist to help mother and nanny be more direct with each other, approaching the situation, she says, "the same as a marriage with issues."

"I tell parents to spit out the rational and your most irrational because the nanny can't read your mind," said Ms. Gold, who noted that she's been approached by corporations to conduct seminars for employees about how to manage nannies so that they can put such complicated dynamics underlie the communication gap. Ms. Spiegel, of Soho Parenting, who recently wrote about the mother-nanny dynamic on the center's blog, said: "The biggest fear is, 'But if she's mad at me will she take it out on my child?' That is consistently voiced."

She also said that she believes that some mothers feel "a tremendous amount of guilt" over paying someone to take on their mothering role. Consequently, she said, they are shy about acting as an employer.

In many cases, there is also a deep affection for the nanny, often a woman who has restored serenity and sanity to a household where heretofore overachieving adults had found themselves completely out of their element in a new world of diapers, spit-up and colic. If she were to leave, the whole house of cards would tumble.

Hilary Vartanian, a media executive who lives in Manhattan, remembers vividly the first few weeks that her nanny came to take care of her 3-month-old son. "I felt I was all thumbs," she said.

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The nanny came, and suddenly her home was calm. “Calm was not part of my DNA,” Ms. Vartanian admitted. “I was all about drive and ambition.” But after the nanny took over, “I would come home and my house was everything the rest of my life wasn’t — clean, calm, the baby wasn’t crying, he was fed. Then she would pass him to me with respect for me as a mother.”

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But the nanny had strong feelings about child rearing. She felt, for example, that the baby should eat freshly mashed vegetables and fruits, not baby food from a jar, even if it was

organic. Ms. Vartanian thought that the organic foods were fine, given the constraints of her schedule.

As her son moved into toddlerhood, Ms. Vartanian began thinking about and reading up on toilet training. She had it all figured out; she would start when her son was around 2 and go from there. One day, when he was a year and a half, she came home from work, and the nanny proudly announced that he had been toilet trained.

“It was done,” Ms. Vartanian said, recounting her shock. “We had never talked about it.”

She said nothing, but once the nanny left for the day, “I burst out crying.” She called her husband. She fretted that she was an inadequate mother, that she had failed to play a part in one of the milestones of her son’s life.

She thought about saying something. Instead, she asked the nanny to accompany her and her son to the pediatrician’s office, where she asked the doctor in the nanny’s presence, “Isn’t it too early for toilet training?”

“It was total triangulated communication,” Ms. Vartanian acknowledges now. (The pediatrician said that it might have been a bit early but that it seemed to be working, so why not continue?)

Eventually, though, Ms. Vartanian did work up the nerve to express her reservations to the nanny directly. “I said: ‘I am the mother. I’m very grateful that you taught him, but in the future can we discuss things like this?’ ”

The nanny, Jenny Flores, said that she and Ms. Vartanian have come to understand and communicate with each other better over the years. When Ms. Vartanian was a new mother, Ms. Flores said, “She was always saying, ‘Whatever you want, Jenny.’ ” Now, she said, her boss is more confident about what she wants from her.

Some mothers tend to deal with their tentativeness by throwing money at the situation. A year ago, Ms. Hershenov, the Hastings-on-Hudson lawyer, bought her children a puppy, a rambunctious yellow Labrador retriever. The straightforward thing to do, she acknowledged, would have been to sit down with her nanny and ask her if she would be willing to take on new responsibilities, like feeding the puppy and walking it. But she didn’t ask.

Perhaps out of guilt, perhaps out of uncertainty about what was appropriate, she dealt with the situation by not dealing with it, leaving her nanny to essentially read her mind and take it upon herself to feed the puppy and take him outside.


Ms. Hershenov eventually hired someone to walk the dog, but she said: “Somewhere in there I knew I hadn’t handled the dog thing the way I should have, and I felt guilty. So what did I do? I gave my nanny a bigger bonus and started paying smaller extra bonuses along the way to express my gratitude and assuage my guilt. But that is not the way I should have dealt with this, I know, for any number of reasons.”

Assemble a group of professional women who have children, and stories like this come up all the time, as someone is bound to bring up what the nanny did (or didn’t) and should (or shouldn’t) do — and to ask plaintively, “What should I say?”

Jackie Quan knew what she was going to say. She had it all planned. Ms. Quan, a real estate broker in Lower Manhattan and a mother of two, noticed something different about her 4-year-old son’s hair one recent night.

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It turned out that the nanny had trimmed it. The boy explained all. His hair was in his eyes while he was having a bath, and he asked her to cut it. Ms. Quan, who always cuts her children's hair, was miffed and planned a don't-ever-do-it-again speech.

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The nanny arrived the next morning. Ms. Quan said, "Good morning." The nanny brought up the haircut immediately and explained the situation, as the son had the night before: it was in his eyes, and he wanted it trimmed.

"O.K.," Ms. Quan said. She thought the nanny understood that her look meant don't do it again.

As so often happens, though, she was wrong. Not long after, she and the nanny parted ways. She now has a new nanny.

A Family Member, Up to a Point

IT'S all about saying what you mean.

While some parents have no trouble telling the caretakers who look after their children what to do, many others find it difficult to act like a boss to someone who can sometimes seem more like a member of the family than an employee.

"We find written communication helps," said Sheilagh Roth, the executive director of the English Nanny and Governess School outside Cleveland, which has been in business for 25 years.

That can mean leaving a list of tasks for the day, but ideally it means drafting a written contract — or at least a detailed job description — explicitly stating the duties of the position, as well as the family's obligations regarding vacation time, overtime, holidays and other basic matters that an employee needs to know. Ms. Roth requires a written contract when she places nannies with families.

Both she and Lisa Spiegel, a director of Soho Parenting, a family counseling center in Manhattan, advise scheduling weekly meetings between mother (or father) and nanny. They should be casual — just a chance to exchange observations and suggestions — but they should be at the same time every week so that each party knows to expect them. That way, no one has to stew about whether and when to bring up a touchy issue, because it can always be raised at the weekly session.

Ms. Spiegel said that it's important for families to remember that their nanny is an employee and not a family member, no matter how much they love the person.

For parents, that means no sharing of confidences about their marriages, their irritation with another parent at the child's school or power struggles at work. But they should make sure that the nanny has the necessary information to do the job. For example, if a parent has been preoccupied with work or a family issue and the children are feeling needy and neglected, the nanny needs to know about it.

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