

Mummy's little helpers

What could be handier than a hybrid of Girl Friday and Mary Poppins to help sort out your life? Meet the magical women who can do just that...

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ONCE, IT WAS the preserve of the rich and famous to pay someone else to do the arduous, boring stuff they didn't care to do themselves. Now, farming out everyday chores is starting to catch on among ordinary mortals with busy family lives.

Switched-on parents are turning to a new breed of family concierge operatives, savvy 'fix-it' professionals who take the hassle out of parenting. Offloading your 'to-do' list – from buying a child's snowsuit in summer, to getting a man to put up nursery shelves – is all the rage. Because having a parent concierge – a kind of private secretary, Girl Friday and Mary Poppins all rolled into one – means that super-busy parents get to spend more quality time with their children.

And the big appeal is that everything is under one roof. "I couldn't do without it," says Sarah Cuckhill, who uses the parent concierge service at her daughter Erin's nursery, Kids Allowed. "They take all the stress out of things. I throw my laundry over the counter in the mornings and it comes back beautifully pressed. They sort out shoe repairs, organise parties and do brilliant homemade organic freezer food – perfect if I don't have time to make tea."

Cuckhill does not describe herself as a high-flyer – she's an ordinary mother of two girls aged three and 12, who works part-time. "We are not footballers' wives, just normal working mothers," she says. "But this service

makes life a lot easier, so you get to do more with your children instead of racing around."

The brainchild of Jennie Johnson, all three branches of Kids Allowed, in northwest England, have a parent concierge service. It was something the nursery's founders wanted from the start. "Obviously, looking after children is the most important part of our business," says Johnson, "but we also wanted to let parents know we care about them, too, offering support and services that benefit the whole family. It's the peripheries around childcare we can help with."

Johnson is adamant that the perception of concierge services as a luxury afforded only by the rich and high-powered no longer holds true. "Parents aren't having to pay a premium for these services," she says. "It's just about convenience." Local businesses also benefit from the arrangement.

"Because we are pooling our buying power, we are able to get a really good deal for parents," says Johnson.

A family concierge is a fairly new concept, agrees James Baker, who heads up the Baby Baby Concierge service in Surrey. In his opinion, it's all to do with trying to manage a healthy work-life balance. "When parents have had a long week at work, the last thing they want is to be sorting out all that extra stuff at the weekend," says Baker.

The Baby Baby Concierge service offers pre- and postnatal services (running the gamut from making a list of baby gear, to

planning a baby shower, getting a cleaner in, stocking the fridge, organising a christening ceremony and even giving new fathers a special information pack detailing ways they can be – er – useful). There is also follow-on stuff for families with growing children, such as researching family-friendly holidays and sourcing schools. "We have had great feedback," says Baker. "Parents really appreciate the short cuts a concierge service can give them."

The Baby Baby Concierge service is part of Your Life, a larger, well-established general concierge service. "We help people move house, put music onto their iPods, do bits of filing for them, and buy or sell items on eBay," says Baker. "It's quite wide-ranging."

Karen Hastings decided to launch her

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members-only, mother-and-baby club Cupcake – which has a Mumciierge service – after watching her friends, previously busy professional women, struggle with the transition to motherhood. "There are a lot of things you are just supposed to know how to do, like sorting out childcare or planning a naming ceremony," says Hastings. "But frankly, all this stuff takes hours to research."

Hastings describes her members as typically aged 30 to 45, with solid careers behind them, and who have enjoyed some of the best things in life. "Now they've started a



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FINDING YOUR HELPERS...

BABY BUNDLE

Where? Greater London area

What? The Baby Assistant is on call day or night to assist with basic chores such as the weekly shop or errands. The Baby Bundle package takes care of all your baby needs for a month, such as decorating the nursery, buying nappies, booking baby-friendly restaurants and researching the best prams.

How much? Baby Assistant £35 an hour; Baby Bundle £100 a month, including four hours' hands-on help.

Contact Tel: 01707 259488; www.thebabybundle.co.uk

CUPCAKE

Where? Southwest London

What? Includes organising 'babymoon' or baby bonding trips; sourcing a nanny, nursery or emergency babysitting; arranging help for the house; sending out thank-you cards and gifts.

How much? £250 joining fee and thereafter £149 a month, there are also limited reduced rates for new members; includes unlimited mumcierge services and access to parent and baby classes.

Contact www.cupcakemum.com

HEAD CONCIERGE

Where? Nationwide

What? Home and family services include food shopping, booking children's entertainers, maids and butlers, arranging babysitting and childminding, organising household repairs.

How much? £25 an hour.

Contact Tel: 0870 027 1011; www.headconcierge.com

KIDS ALLOWED

Where? Northwest, including Cheadle, Knutsford and West Didsbury

What? Drop off your ironing, laundry, dry-cleaning or book a babysitter when you drop off children at the nursery.

How much? £47 a day for childcare, including nappies and foods. Additional charges for extra services.

Contact Tel: 0870 750 1021; www.kidsallowed.com

MOMCIERGE

Where? New York City, USA

What? Up-to-the-minute family information and resources, all tried, tested and approved.

How much? \$150 (£75) for yearly membership, or \$50 (£25) an hour.

Contact www.momcierge.com

MUMS ON CALL

Where? Barnes, Chiswick, Ealing and Kew

What? Two services: Flexi Childcare (up to three hours per booking) and Helping Hands (includes setting up children's parties, collecting groceries, dry-cleaning, waiting in for tradesmen, assisting with house moves, even returning DVDs).

How much? £15 registration, then £8 an hour, paid directly to the mother on call, and £5.50 booking fee.

Contact www.mumsoncall.com

YOUR LIFE

Where? Southeast England

What? Baby Concierge service takes care of baby needs; the more general family service sources childcare, schools and family-friendly holidays.

How much? From £25 an hour.

Contact Tel: 01306 711039; www.yourlifeuk.com

family, they want to continue having the best, and doing the best for their babies," she says.

Rebecca Younie, mother of Ella, nine months, has just signed up for Cupcake's Mumcierge service. "You can spend ages surfing the internet for what you need," she says. "Instead, it's nice to go to people who know what they're talking about, who you can trust to give quality advice and information."

THE REIGNING QUEENS of the parent concierge scene must be New York-based Alyssa Sadoff and Hilary Valentine. These two savvy 'moms' run Momcierge, and seem to be the eyes and ears of all that is child-friendly in The Big Apple. Momcierge offers a huge range of services – from fixing up a one-of-a-kind experience for family and friends, to pointing out the best shops for school shoes, to drawing up a great reading list (Alyssa is a former children's librarian) – for lucky Manhattanite families.

"We started Momcierge after a friend suggested we stop answering all of our acquaintances' questions for free," says Sadoff. "We were the 'go to girls' for all our friends needing advice on everything from sleep-away camp research to tae kwon do classes."

The pair – whose motto is "Life is short, so listen to us" – have found that most parents just want reliable information so they can make the plans and arrangements themselves. "We make their lives easier by eliminating some of the steps," says Valentine.

"What's it like?" asks Nancy Kauffman, mother of Jake, who describes herself as a super-satisfied Momcierge member.

"Well, think of anything you want to know: Where to go? What to get? What to do? Now, imagine getting not only the answer, but the best, most unique answer, with four back-ups. All spot on. All perfect. That's how it is. It sounds crazy, but they know everything."

But what about the parent who worries she should be doing it all herself? "I am as prone to guilt as anyone," says Kauffman, "but what Momcierge does is give me information that leaves me more time to actually be with my family and enjoy whatever we are trying to do. They are like my personalised Google system!"

Back in Blighty, Lisa Barrett is busy putting the finishing touches to her new service, Mums On Call. An ex-journalist, childminder and mother of three, Barrett hit on the idea when she was moving house last year. "I am fortunate in that my mother lives



really close and is often on hand to help," she says. "But that weekend when we moved house and had to look after the children at the same time was horrendous. I needed someone who could either help unpack boxes, or take my youngest, Lily, to the park for a couple of hours. And I couldn't keep asking my mother."

Barrett decided that what local families needed was access to on-call mother-substitutes, available for hire whenever the going got tough. "It's a modern trend that couples with children often have no extended network of help. We're not living near our mothers, grandmothers and aunts and we can't keep on asking our friends."

Mums On Call is entirely staffed by mothers, "so we all understand what it's like to have children, we get your needs," says Barrett. The Helping Hands service means

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mothers can help strike your to-do list, whether it be picking up stuff for a dinner party, or just generally helping out with children and everyday tasks at home. "It's a great combination of emergency care and 'to do' people," says Eva Kegan, a freelance PR and mother of Ella, seven, who has signed-up for the Mums On Call Flexi Childcare option.

And what about parents worrying that employing a family concierge will advertise the fact that they aren't as on top of things as they would like? "If you can pay someone to do the time-consuming, boring stuff, why not?" says Barrett. "As parents, we're all in the same boat. We know what it's like. And at the end of the day, a good parent concierge is just about making things a little easier for you" ■

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