

Big sis. Role model. Superstar ...dispelling the myths around au pairs.



Many industries are full of myths. And unfortunately there are a number of New Zealand employers who pay homage to many of them. In particular, the au pair industry in New Zealand is enshrined in its fair share of folklore. And like all myths, they are mythical in the true sense of the word.

Casey Muraahi from New Zealand's own Au Pair Link says the most common myth she hears is that only the rich and famous can afford live-in child care. "Not so," Casey says. "Au pairs provide a flexible form of child care on a very cost-effective model. Host families can have live in home-based early childhood care for as little as \$190 plus tax per week for up to four children. Parents with children at day care centres pay per child which can work out to be a lot more expensive."

Another myth that arises is that au pairs are glorified housecleaners who know nothing about New Zealand's early childhood education curriculum. "All our au pairs complete a comprehensive orientation course when they first arrive covering such things as the early childhood curriculum, first aid training, positive child guidance and much more," explains Casey. "Au pairs do have varying levels of childcare experience but it's important to ensure all who are on Ministry of Education programmes have a minimum of 200 hours experience working with children. Responsible agencies ensure any cleaning the au pairs do is related to the children in their care.

Likewise, not just anyone can become an au pair. Screening processes should include character and childcare reference checks, a personal interview to assess suitability and personality, as well as police and medical checks. There are also au pairs available that have an early childhood qualification from their home country or high levels of experience with children. She says Au Pair Link is the only au pair agency in New Zealand to provide a programme tailored to the skills of professional or highly qualified au pair candidates.

Many of the questions Casey gets from prospective customers are related to working hours and support from the agency. Au pairs are generally employed on a working week basis but they do understand that flexibility and working full time is a requirement of the programme. Forty-five hours a week can easily be customised to fit a host family's schedule and more often than not au pairs are happy to provide occasional babysitting or care in the weekends at an agreed rate.

With responsible au pair agencies, host families and au pairs alike can expect a personal and ongoing support service including regular visits by a qualified early childhood teacher to the family home each month, Casey says: "We also provide weekly playgroups and outings that au pairs can bring children along to as well as professional development and mediation services. People considering an au pair should also look for a rematch guarantee. That means if an initial placement

doesn't work out, the agency works with the family to find an au pair that better matches their childcare needs."

Further myths include au pairs being available only in major cities and that many are not suitable to look after babies. "Both those certainly don't apply," Casey explains. "In our experience many au pairs delight in experiencing rural life in New Zealand. Au Pair Link is licensed throughout New Zealand and our service has proven to be very popular with rural families in the Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Taranaki and Canterbury. While au pairs all have varied experience, many have good relevant experience working with babies. There are varying programmes, such as Au Pair Link's Au Pair Whiz, available should they want a qualified or more experienced au pair to take care of their babies."

One of the major benefits of having an au pair from overseas is the cultural exchange. Au pairs are able to share their culture with the children who in many instances gain exposure to a second language. Research suggests children who learn a second language early in life can grow up to enjoy learning advantages later on due to the early brain development as a result of their learning experience.

Having an au pair can be a wonderfully fulfilling experience for the entire family. They become part of the family; he or she adapts to family routines ensuring children feel secure and confident. An au pair also helps free up parental time providing the opportunity to enjoy quality time with their children. ■

Anyone considering employing an au pair should ensure it is licensed as a home based Early Childhood Education (ECE) provider by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. More information is available on the Au Pair Link website at www.aupairlink.co.nz.



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Casey Muraahi from Au Pair Link.

THE HEART OF YOUR FAMILY JUST GOT BIGGER.

If you're looking for quality, affordable, in-home early childhood care and education across New Zealand, we'd love to hear from you. With hundreds of au pairs to browse through and speak with using our online matching system, it's never been faster, or easier, to find the perfect au pair for your most precious little person!

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