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# HELP AT hand

*Once considered the sole domain of the wealthy, au pairs are becoming an increasingly popular and economical approach to childcare*

WORDS ANNA MURRAY



Imagine that it's Monday morning. It's 7.30, the kids are yet to get out of their pyjamas or eat their toast and you have to be out of the door by 8am. Not a problem. You merely hand the children over to their carer and step out the door, knowing that they will be fed, watered and dressed soon enough.

Now, imagine that it's Thursday night. You and your husband are both in need of some time out and a chance to reconnect with each other outside of the hustle and bustle of daily life. Again, not a problem. You simply give that same carer a wave as you jump in the car and enjoy a few delicious hours of freedom.

For the average busy mum that all probably sounds like a dream. But it's a welcome reality for many Kiwi families who are opting to hire an au pair to help look after their brood. Long gone are the days when au pairs were considered the sole domain of the wealthy. In fact, these live-in carers are often one of the more cost-effective childcare options available.

The simple economics of the situation made getting an au pair an obvious choice for Auckland mother Tamah McLean when she had her third baby a year ago.

"For us, it's the best quality childcare we could afford," she says.

On top of providing board and lodgings, families can expect to pay an au pair around \$150-\$250 (net) per week, depending on

## PEOPLE HAVE THEIR OWN WAY OF DOING THINGS, SO YOU'VE JUST GOT TO EITHER ACCEPT IT AND KIND OF RELAX ABOUT IT OR HAVE REALLY CLEAR GUIDELINES AROUND HOW YOU WANT THINGS DONE.

which agency they use and the set number of hours included. And that cost is the same for one child as it is for three children, as opposed to daycare where the charge is per child. But the appeal of an au pair is more than just financial for the McLeans.

"The kids are home and that's quite important to me," Tamah says. "And the au pair makes it kind of seamless, because they're there first thing in the morning and last thing at night."

That kind of availability is especially popular with parents who don't work a regular nine-to-five job. As Casey Muraahi, General Manager at Au Pair Link, points out: "Daycare hours don't suit all families."

"You can have people that are shift workers, midwives, doctors, all of those sorts of things where typical daycare hours don't necessarily work for them. Also, rural families, farming families where you have to get up really early in the morning to milk the cows, they need flexibility [in their childcare]."

It was this convenience factor that proved the driving force for Joanne Mahon and her family when they first opted for an au pair. Living on a farm near Warkworth, she found daycare problematic with the first of her three children. While the daycare centre itself was "fantastic", pick-up and drop-off for her daughter, Lucy, was adding quite a bit of time to the family's day. Something had to give.

"When I went back to work after maternity leave with our second daughter, Emily, we had heard about our friends who had gone down the au pair route. They said it was a really good option, so we looked into it and decided it was something we wanted to give a go," Joanne says.

And the Mahons' long days of logistical nightmares came to an end.

The au pair arrangement does, of course, have what many see as a potential downside. That is, the small matter of another adult

living in your home.

Tamah says a little friction is normal in that situation.

"When there are adults cohabiting, everyone can be a little moody occasionally. That's all quite natural stuff," she says.

"You're realising that in the day-to-day stuff, it can be a bit up and down – but the bigger picture is really awesome."

Joanne agrees.

"I think the biggest negative for us is having someone living in your space," she says. "You know, people have their own way of doing things, so you've just got to either accept it and kind of relax about it or have really clear guidelines around how you want things done."

As far as guidelines go, both the McLean and Mahon families decided it was in their best interests to write these down – and in some detail – for their prospective au pairs to read. Amongst other things, these guides included instructions around discipline and respecting parenting decisions, as well as →



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CHILDCARE OPTION

Joanne (left) and Tamah (right) have each used au pairs to help care for their families



THE AU PAIR MAKES IT KIND OF SEAMLESS, BECAUSE THEY'RE THERE  
FIRST THING IN THE MORNING AND LAST THING AT NIGHT.

more practical rules such as curfews on work nights.

"It just makes for a more harmonious life together," Joanne says. "Then you're all on the same page. Clear expectations build you up for success."

However, Casey at Au Pair Link says a truly successful arrangement begins before the au pair even arrives in New Zealand.

"I think the matching process is really important. For us, it's about helping families to choose the right au pair for their family, so that they do have a successful placement," she says. "[It's about] finding the right personality for their family, because every family is so different."

Still, despite everyone's best efforts, some matches simply don't work out, as Tamah found with the second of the three au pairs to live with her family.

"Our second au pair only stayed with us for a month," she says. "It didn't work so well, I think purely because it was a bad match."

"[The au pair] was great and lovely in her own way, but I think a bit overwhelmed by the job and for us, it was quite a big job. She had, at that stage, a five-year-old, a four-year-old and a six-month-old to look after, so that's a pretty big job and she just wasn't quite the right fit for that."

"But we all realised that quite quickly and were really well supported by our agency. They were amazing, for both sides, I'd say."

It's for that very reason that Casey strongly recommends families use a reputable agency if they do decide to go the au pair route.

"By using an agency, they're not on their own. If any issues do arise, there's a lot of support they can have," she says.

"We also offer mediation services if there's any kind of issues that arise and help to iron out any kinks. And we can help with homesickness and culture shock that the au pairs often experience."

"I think where it can go wrong sometimes is if an au pair and a family match privately and they're out in the wops and the au pair's all on their own, the family's got no support, and they've got nobody to turn to if things aren't going right."

But for the most part, Casey says families are very happy with their au pair arrangement.

"The feedback that we get from families is that they love having another family member, they enjoy the conversations at dinner about the child's day."

"And [the parents] love the flexibility and being able to go out on date nights and being able to utilise their au pairs at different times of the day. Most say that it's definitely made their life a lot easier."

Both Joanne and Tamah can attest to that. "It's not perfect. I don't think any scenario where somebody else is looking after your children is," Tamah says. "[But] I think it's really good. For us, the benefits have definitely outweighed the negatives." ■

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