

# Sitter service

Paulina Podgorska is changing the way Canadian families find child care

By Lisa Evans



Paulina Podgorska set up a system to help parents find reliable babysitting at SOSsitter.ca.

A few months after giving birth to her now eight-year-old son, Montreal mom Paulina Podgorska embarked on a long and stressful search for a full-time caregiver so she could return to work. What she found were fully booked day-care centres with long waiting lists and few private caregiver options. A Polish-born immigrant, Podgorska wanted to find a nanny who also spoke her native tongue.

At the time, it seemed the only options for finding a babysitter or nanny were free classified ads and referrals from family or friends. These limited search options left Podgorska feeling uncertain. "The free ads scared me because you don't know who will be replying," she says. "Also, I noticed when a family found a nanny or babysitter, they didn't like to share her." She eventually found a sitter (although one who didn't speak Polish) and returned

to work when her son was nine months old.

After expressing her frustrations at the challenges she found locating suitable child care with other working mothers, she was surprised to find how many others had similar experiences. Sensing a gap in the market, Podgorska began to brainstorm an idea that would make the process of finding a babysitter easier. In 2009, she left her job at an advertising agency and founded SOSsitter (called SOSgarde in French), an internet-based service that connects families with suitable caregivers.

The service now has more than 18,000 registered caregivers and more than 7,000 families. Families pay a membership fee and can access profiles of caregivers in their area simply by entering their postal code. Caregivers can post their profiles for free, which are reviewed by Podgorska's company. Parents

can contact the sitter directly and invite them for an interview. Podgorska has noticed a greater demand for live-in nannies, particularly in the big cities.

Because of Podgorska's difficulties in finding a babysitter who spoke her native tongue, she added a category that allows caregivers to mention their language, a feature she says has been particularly popular among the Arabic and Spanish communities in her community of Montreal who want their children to grow up speaking their parents' native language. "I wanted my son to know where his roots are," she says, adding introducing kids to a language at an early age means it becomes more ingrained in them than trying to teach them when they're school-aged. "All the lullabies, he knows in Polish," she says.

Podgorska recognizes the special difficulties newcomer families in particular face in locating child care. While in her native Poland, multi-generational families are commonplace and child care responsibilities are often passed to the grandparents, immigrant families with limited family networks in Canada may not have the option of keeping child care in the family unit. "Family members often live in other cities [or countries!], mak-

ing child care difficult," she says.

Even when families live close by, many simply aren't willing to take over the child care responsibilities. "In many cases, the parents may be retired and they want to live their own lives," she says.

In 2013, Podgorska expanded her company to include senior care, special needs, pet care and house care (cleaning services) after receiving requests from members who also needed help with these areas of their lives. She's also hired two moms to help her run the business, reviewing profiles of caregivers for quality control.

Starting SOSsitter wasn't an easy step for Podgorska, who likens becoming an entrepreneur to the immigration process — going from a safe, corporate environment where she had the security of a regular paycheque to something unknown — and credits her journey to Canada for preparing her for becoming an entrepreneur. "What immigration really taught me is you are the king of your destiny and you have the power to create the life for yourself the way you would like to have it. But for that [to happen], it takes courage and hard work and some sacrifices. In that way, immigration is like [entrepreneurship]," she says. 🌟

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