

Families go in-house for a pair of helping hands

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August 23, 2011



Juggling act: Marcus and Michelle McDonald, right, turned to German au pair Stefanie Bings to help care for their daughter, Ava, 4. Photo: Joe Armao

MORE Victorian families are turning to au pairs to solve their childcare woes.

One Australian-based au pair agency, which places mostly young, female travellers with Australian families, has noticed a 150 per cent increase in requests for au pairs in the past year.

Meanwhile, Aupair World, an online agency, based in Germany, which places au pairs globally, says the number of Australian families using its service has grown from 300 in 2005 to 2100 last year.

Wendi Aylward from AIFS AU Pair in Australia attributes rising demand to a shortage of childcare places and increased awareness.

Au pairs live in the home and typically provide care for children and light housekeeping duties in exchange for accommodation and food and a stipend of \$150 to \$250.

"We are increasingly hearing from families who simply can't get the childcare they need," Ms Aylward says.

Au pairs are also cheaper than nannies, who typically charge \$20 to \$25 an hour.

For Marcus McDonald, an engineer who works in Port Melbourne and his wife Michelle, who runs a business from her home in Gisborne, having an au pair was the only viable option for their four-year-old daughter, Ava, after they struggled to find family day care.

Their first au pair started in February but left in July to travel.

Stefanie Bings, 18, from Germany, took over.

"My au pairs have been an absolute godsend. I pay Stefanie \$7 an hour on top of board and she does 29 hours a week for me."

Nicole Kofkin, from Smart Au Pairs, says many families find au pairs a more flexible alternative to other childcare options.

"Not everybody works from nine to five and yet childcare seems to predominantly cater to a nine-to-five workforce," she says. For lawyer Nicole Spicer, who works full-time, au pairs have provided the kind of flexible and convenient care she and her husband, also a lawyer, needed for their two youngest children, Anika, 9, and Daniel, 5.

They are now working with their second au pair, who gets the children to and from school, prepares meals and helps with homework.

Early Childhood Australia chief executive Pam Cahir says parents opting to have au pairs, who do not require any formal qualifications, should be vigilant when it comes to choosing an employee.

"Au pairs are a very legitimate choice for parents. At the same time, caring for children isn't a job for just anybody off the street. Parents need to be really thorough in terms of looking at these people's qualifications and references and making sure they have had the appropriate police checks," Ms Cahir says.

