

Child Care Crosses Cultural Divide

By Jennifer Wake



The Kolm family's au pair, Veronika Skotnicova, watches the four children while Christine volunteers at a Halloween Carnival booth at Campolindo on Oct. 27. Photo Jennifer Wake

As children get older, their schedules can become hectic, making choosing proper child care a daunting task. When Moraga resident and attorney Christine Kolm had her four children in an after-school program, she found herself scrambling to fit everything in.

"When you have little ones, I think it's good to have them in a day care setting where they can socialize in different environments and gain a stronger sense of self," she said. "But when the kids are older, they have homework that has to be done, soccer and different events to attend. I would get home between six and six-thirty and dinner, homework and baths had to be done within a two and a half hour period."

Kolm hired a nanny, but the cost ranged between \$35-45,000 per year. "The really good ones make more," she said.

With her four children ranging in age from kindergarten to middle school, Kolm found an economical alternative that was a better fit for her hectic family schedule: an au pair.

Typically, au pairs range in age from 18 to 26 and come from all over Europe, as well as some from China and Latin America, to live with a host family for an average of one year. In addition to providing childcare, many au pairs assist with light housekeeping, help with meals, and drive children to and from school and extracurricular activities.

Annual costs for an au pair range between \$15-18,000, not including room and board. San Francisco-based AuPairCare – just one of several au pair agencies in the country – has placed more than 30,000 au pairs from

40 countries with families across the United States. According to Julia Brewer, who is an area director for AuPairCare, the program has grown a lot in the past five years.

"It's seen as a good child care solution," she said. "And because English has become the language of business, learning English is a big motivation for the au pairs. English gives them a skill they can take back."

The program is considered an exchange program by the U.S. Department of State, although it's only a one-way exchange, and the rules regarding au pairs (including total hours per day and week they can work) are overseen by this agency.

"You're inviting someone who's from another culture into your home, which has its pluses and minuses," said Kolm, who recently had an au pair from Poland live with her family for a year, and in August welcomed a new au pair from the Czech Republic. "With an au pair, your family experiences another culture and another language. With in home care, your home becomes the base for your family, rather than a day care facility. Unlike a day care facility, if a child is sick, an au pair can still help provide care. There are fewer bumps in the road. The flip side is that you are inviting a new person into your home to live with you. There are always adjustments that have to be made. But, if you have space in the home and space in your family, it can work."

The toughest part for the au pair, says Brewer, is making the cultural adjustment and fighting homesickness.

"We provide them with support and organize monthly events," said Brewer, who acts as an intermediary between the au pairs and their host families. "Most of them have never been to the United States. It's a huge adjustment."

Brewer says the biggest mistake families make is thinking their au pair will be like Mary Poppins.

"Families who are the most successful are the ones who treat an au pair as a family member – like a niece or a best friend's daughter from another country," she said. "People with the most success realize they are not just an employee, and they're not professional nannies, either. They must have realistic expectations of what an au pair can provide."

Kolm agrees. "You have to be patient," she said. "They're dealing with culture shock and being away from people who speak their language and react the same as they do. It takes about three months, but they become part of your family."

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