



A week in the life of an unfortunate au pair

Au pairs normally have a shelf life of about a year, someone once told me. I am proud to say that we bucked this trend and kept our first child minder for a whopping 15 months until she declared that she could not cope any more – not with the children but with us, the parents.

By *David Willows*

However, there was not much time for psychological reflection. I had three working days to find a solution and no idea where to start. So I began to 'Google'.

After a couple of days of endless e-mailing of family descriptions, enduring awkward interview calls with young girls who spoke little English and could not have been less interested in my precious baby girls, I was beginning to give up hope.

Then we stumbled across Amy (not her real name). She gave the appearance of being extremely focused on the children, carrying a strong sense of morality, had previous experience of young children in various family and professional settings and came with outstanding references from two schools. Whilst shy, she seemed very sweet on the phone and was available immediately. I even spoke with her mother who was also delightful!

I offered Amy the job and prepared to bring her back to Brussels.

First impressions

Usually, for me, first impressions are everything. But this time I did not listen to the little voice inside my head. I should have taken more notice of the body language, the subtle look away as I shook her hand, the awkward gestures and the overprotective

mother's explanations of why she had packed 15 packets of green tea.

I was expecting the first few minutes of our journey to be tough. I was picking up someone I had never met before and was going to be 'trapped' in the car with her for the next five hours. I had to take the lead in the conversation. But it was harder

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than I thought. Despite my best efforts, Amy sat motionless, sipping neat lemon juice throughout the journey.

Settling in

I felt obliged to give Amy the benefit of the doubt. So I put the journey down to a mixture of homesickness, my pathetic attempts to engage her in conversation, and a minor dose of travel-sickness. A good night's sleep would do the trick, and in the morning, Amy would meet the babies and all would be well.

Day one was set aside for getting to know the babies, establishing what has to happen and when, followed by a quick trip to the supermarket to buy whatever food Amy wanted to eat for the week.

That was when things began to get complicated. Apparently the dairy allergy she had mentioned was just one of several eating restrictions that included no sugar, no meat, no fat and nothing after 4pm. Given a trolley, a bank card and all the time in the world, Amy came back with a packet of quick-boil rice. Maybe it was the tea, but even on the first day I noticed that every time I walked into the room Amy asked to be excused in order to use the toilet. Call me nosy, but I never once heard the toilet flush. Why was Amy washing her hands so much, I wondered?

Taking responsibility

On Wednesday evening I arrived home to what looked like a war zone. The babies were screaming in the living room. The morning's bottles of milk were still untouched

in the kitchen. There were biscuit crumbs all over the floor. There was no power in the house and the central heating had been off all day. I felt myself becoming angry and wanted an explanation.

Amy explained how the electricity had gone off five minutes after I left the house at 7.50am, as she had more rice to cook. She

had not worked out how to trip the switch. She did not know how to turn on the mobile phone I had given her. So she had decided to spend the day singing songs, reading bible stories and eating biscuits. And no, the children had not had their afternoon fruit, as requested, as (remarkably) the fruit shop down the street had apparently completely run out of fruit!

The talk

Thankfully, Thursday was less eventful. But when I came home on Friday to find Amy changing nappies wearing huge, thick rubber gloves, I knew that she would have to leave. I decided first to write to her mother to explain the situation. When I told Amy on the Saturday morning, she said nothing – absolutely nothing. I half expected her to shout, ask questions, demand an explanation, justify herself ... Instead, she went quietly up to her room and closed the door.

After that, Amy never acknowledged the existence of our children in any way. It was as if they simply were not there.

Journey home

The journey home was planned for 8am on Sunday morning, so we opted for an early night. However, sleep was broken by the noise of someone washing their hands. I looked at the alarm clock. It was precisely two minutes past midnight.

We found Amy talking to herself, standing next to all her bags, with her coat on, by the front door. "Is everything okay, Amy?" we

enquired, still half asleep. "Okay? Okay?" Amy replied, clearly startled by our request. "What on earth could *possibly* be wrong?"

As we fell back to sleep, I could not help but laugh out loud. Never could I have imagined a more fitting, more surreal scene for this extraordinary week. After all, what *could* possibly be wrong?

Last goodbyes

The trip back to the UK was even quieter than the journey exactly one week before. Amy sat in the back of the car pretending to be asleep. We met up with mum at Maidstone services – Amy could not remember what kind of car her mum had, but thought it was red.

We never saw them again. Three days later, though, I did receive an e-mail accusing us of being abusive parents, placing hidden cameras all over the house, stealing her possessions, failing to inform her that we all had a number of 'highly infectious diseases', not feeding her, and standing in need of God's judgement. After a week in her care, Amy declared that the bruises on our children had gone, their hair had grown (because they were happy), and that she had lost weight because we had refused to feed her.

Shutting down my PC, I felt for the first time that I knew Amy, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

New beginnings

A few days later, I was sitting in my car in Brussels waiting to meet another au pair, this time from Iceland.

I called her on her mobile. "I am walking towards you now," she explained cheerfully. And there she was, wearing a pink wig, yellow and red-hooped tights and carrying a *Teletubby* rucksack on her back.

Stepping into the car, she told us how excited she was because she had managed to find an octopus watch and some plastic angel wings.

Inside, I simply smiled. Life is never dull. And I drove home to begin a new adventure.