



For starters

Following last month's start-up advice, founders of nanny agencies in different parts of the country talk about why and how they got going

DEBORAH ELLIFF of *Little Masters and Misses* in Croydon started out as a nanny.

'I was 18 when I first became interested in working in a nanny agency. Having completed my NNEB in 1977 I spent seven years working as a nanny in both the UK and abroad. My experience of agencies was, at best, uninspiring. All the established agencies were in London, hours away from Broadstairs where I lived. Agency interviews tended to be brief and I know that my references were not always checked.

'I felt a definite lack of interest in my needs and terms of employment, and so chose three agencies with whom I stayed on the books and built up a good relationship.

'As time went on I became concerned that parents approaching agencies weren't getting the level of service they deserved or that they should expect. The more I thought about this mismatch between the service parents and nannies needed, and the service I knew they were offered, the more determined I became to run my own agency. I spent 1983 to 1985 working seven days a week as a nanny and cleaner, saving up for

an office, insurance, license and print costs.

'I set up Little Masters and Misses from a rented bedsitter in south London in 1985. Nothing could have prepared me for how much hard work was involved. Initially, I worked in the office from Monday to Friday, babysitting four nights a week, running a crèche at Tottenham Hotspur football club on Saturdays, and doing my accounts and sleeping on Sundays. My social life was non-existent. I didn't take a holiday for six years.

'Having enjoyed my career as a nanny gave me a definite advantage when it came to understanding and advising nannies and parents. I now employ two consultants who also work as nannies and this makes ours a very nanny-friendly agency. We have a golden rule never to try to persuade a nanny to accept a job they feel unsure about.

'This year I am celebrating 15 years in business. There are around 800 families and 600 nannies and babysitters on my books. I will never lose sight of the fact that this business is about providing care for vulnerable young children. Since 1998 I have introduced several initiatives to improve our services, including regular talks in our



shop about meningitis by a doctor, while the British Red Cross have, under my guidance, designed a Saturday first aid course for us.

'Procedures change quickly in childcare and it's vital that nannies can keep up to date with current thinking. The more information I can make available to nannies, the better the standard of care received by the children.'