

## Alt-Ctrl Parenting

Want to Push Your Kid's Buttons? Try The Keyboard.

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Like a knockoff [Mary Poppins](#), she magically appears with a carpetbag, a pair of spectacles and a slight accent, the way that all child-care providers must in this era of "Supernanny" and "Nanny 911." "Relax," she intones calmly. "Nanny's here."

Nanny is the newest face of outsourced parenting. She arrives not at your doorstep but on your computer screen, as part of NannysCircle.com. The site, launched last month and originally developed for families with ADHD children (but don't we all have an attention deficit these days?), is a Web tool that turns household management into a [Wii](#)-like experience -- remote access and avatar children.

"Give Nanny 20 minutes and she'll give you peace of mind," says the beginning of the site's four-minute introduction video. (We are noting that replacing "Nanny" with "[Xanax](#)" throughout most of the intro does not at all change its effect.)

What follows is a presentation for a brilliant program that appears to allow you to never talk to your child again. For just \$9.95 a month!

How This Can Be:

Have a chore, message or aspirational goal for your child to accomplish? Send him a note via Nanny's parental control panel. To receive it, your child must simply go to his room, log onto Nanny's Circle on his computer, then go to his *virtual* room, then log on to his virtual computer (in the virtual room), then read the note.

After finishing the task, your child checks it off on a virtual chore chart. When you log back on, you confirm the chore was completed with your own check mark, allowing your kid to amass points to decorate his or her room. (The virtual one).

Old way: "Madison, did you feed the dog like I asked?"

You see the appeal. It's tidy. Parenting, a messy series of weary battles that never seem to lead anywhere, becomes something that can be checked off and filed. No back talk. Just hit "send."

It's not a totally new concept. Sites like Cosi and Fircle have marketed themselves as online family schedulers for several years.

But those sites basically look like digital day planners -- online versions of the paper things we already used -- meant to be visited but not hung out in. Nanny's Circle is built for lounging: children's rooms on the site come equipped with televisions, journals and trunks full of games. And, of course, that computer, which makes a visitor feel like he is in not [Second Life](#) but Third Life, in an online world in an online world.

So far the site serves just 200 families. But one should never underestimate the desperation of harried parents: Cosi, which launched in 2006, has more than 600,000 users.

"Lots of families struggle with managing their lives," says Nanny's Circle founder Gwen Freer, who has a master's degree in education and a bachelor's in psychology. "We see our children far less than ever before."

Solution . . . parenting by computer?

But members seem to love it. Karen Brieant, a mom in Camillus, N.Y., signed up her daughter Lauren, 13, while leaving Lauren's twin brother Nanny-free so she'd have a base line for the program's success. "The idea was, let's get more organized so you can do [chores] without us *talking* about it," says Brieant.

"There was a *lot* of nagging" pre-Nanny, Lauren says. "Now she doesn't have to do that. I think it's more fun to go on the computer anyway."

Now, when the Brieants do talk, the conversation focuses less on bickering about what did or did not get done, "and more, 'Hey, how was track? How was practice?' " says Brieant.

It seems, to Mom, anyway, that Lauren does her chores more readily. It's actually pleasant.

Beth Dawson, an interior designer in Old Saybrook, Conn., originally subscribed to Nanny's Circle just to manage her two children's schedules. McKenzie, 8, plays soccer and has a "very full" social calendar. "Charlie is more of my intellectual," says Dawson. "He's experimenting with chess."

Charlie is 6.

Dawson, too, has noticed a decrease in family discord in the few weeks they've been using Nanny's Circle.

*She* doesn't have to hassle them. Nanny does.

"We're streamlining the parenting process," Dawson says.

There was a time (forever?) when "mom" was synonymous with "nag," when memories of our folks were one part fuzzy and two parts "Yes, that means *drying* the dishes, too."

Those exhausting parts of parenting seemed to be part and parcel of the other, rewarding stuff. Compartmentalizing the job, making the computer be the bad cop? What a relief.

And yet, one wonders about the outcomes.

Call the Nanny's Circle headquarters in North Carolina and you are met with the greeting, "Welcome to Nanny, your place for family harmony and organization."

That place, apparently, requires separate laptops.