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The Failures and Possibilities of Au Pairs as Public Diplomats ^[1]

Cultural and educational exchange programs are effective public diplomacy tools because they enrich both those who go abroad and the societies they visit.

Right?

That good intention may not be the primary motivation behind the au pair childcare program the United States facilitates. This mismanaged program is being exploited and turned into more of a profitable business than cultural experience.

Au pair, French for "on par," means that the young person is on par with the American family. Young women ages 18-26 come from all around the world to care for children, become part of an American family and go to school. Meanwhile, there is an interaction between the international visitor and the hosts where each side stands to benefit from the experience.

When the program was founded in 1986, the U.S. Information Agency supervised it as an Educational and Cultural exchange. From the beginning, the program lacked supervision and needed stronger regulations.

The biggest complaint from current au pair families is the inadequacy of the government-sanctioned sponsor agencies, which recruit, screen, train and place au pairs with American families.

Tracy Huber of West Milford, N.J., said she is happy with her present au pair, "but had to weed through a nightmare to get to this place." She and other families tried several au pairs "in a short period of time to find a suitable au pair for the children, with no support [from sponsors] once fees are locked in." Another family complained that their children "have seen five very flaky people come and go from our home."

Lisa Thostenson of Inver Grove Heights, Minn., said the same sponsoring agency matched her with three unsuitable au pairs. Although au pairs must be able to drive, "one girl was blind in one eye," said Thostenson, and "unable to drive safely; this was not disclosed." Another refused to watch the children, and not all of them spoke English, in which they are required to be proficient.

"My son, who is 8, told [the au pair] he was going to play with his friend in the neighborhood," Thostenson said. "When I noticed he was gone, I asked her where he was and she had no idea...also not a clue when he was planning to return."

Before the USIA was disbanded and control of the au pair program was handed over to the State Department, it attempted to rein in the program by raising the minimum age and

shortening the au pair's childcare workweek as well as requiring them to attend class.

Congress appeared reluctant to consider any changes in the popular program. Additionally, one major au pair-sponsoring agency lobbied against the shorter work week.

The lax laws have allowed the agencies to continue making money on a flawed product. In 1992, 7,287 Western European au pairs came to the United States. Host families paid a fee of \$3,500 to the agency separate from the au pair's weekly wages. At that time, placing au pairs was a \$25.5 million business. Today, there are nearly twice as many au pairs per year – 14,000 from all around the world – and the growth is reflected in the sponsors' annual fee – around \$6,500. These agencies run a \$91 million business and facilitate the largest childcare organization in the country.

Stiffer regulations were adopted after an 18-year old au pair from Britain, part of the U.S.-administered program, was convicted in 1997 of killing an 8-month-old boy in her care, but the Department of State still does not hold agencies accountable for au pairs that do not meet job requirements. Rather, it warns families that "having an international visitor in one's home, and as part of the family, can be difficult for families and the au pair," and that sponsor organizations cannot guarantee the competency of the au pair. It cautions au pair families "to read the small print of your contract with the sponsor agency."

It seems families only stand for this because of the cost incentive of hiring an au pair over a domestic nanny. Huber, who shared her experiences with other au pair families on the Internet, said, "The reason these programs are so popular is because the lack of affordable childcare is like an epidemic in this country...\$24,000 in daycare a year is just not affordable for us."

The annual total cost for an au pair is about \$16,000 per year, while a professional nanny can cost about \$10,000 more than that. Au pairs are paid a \$139.05 weekly stipend by families.

By comparison, "the average compensation for nannies who work a 45-50 hour week is \$350-\$600 per week," said Kathleen Webb, president of Home Work Solutions, Inc., a professional nanny agency. "There are many \$30,000-\$50,000 [per year] professional nannies in the upscale urban markets," and this salary excludes the unemployment and social security taxes the family must cover when employing a domestic nanny.

But Myrna Alphonse, a career nanny for 16 years, thinks the cost can be worth the continuity a long-term nanny offers a child; the au pair program is only one year, so families experience frequent turnover.

Today, the au pair workweek remains at a maximum of 45 hours per week, and au pairs from ages 18 to 26 may still participate in the program. They must now complete 6 hours of academic study, and cannot be placed in a home where there is an infant less than three months "unless a parent or other responsible adult is at home." They are also required to receive "at least 8 hours of child safety and 24 hours of child development instruction" before being placed with an American family.

Despite these requirements, the State Department must become even more involved with the oversight of a rapidly growing childcare program. Au pairs should be at least 21 years of age and the agencies must be held accountable for training that right now is poor to non-existent, according to numerous disgruntled au pair families. The State Department should grade

sponsors based on surveys of au pair family experiences and post those grades on the government's au pair Web site. Families can then select the most popular and best-qualified au pair sponsors. And finally, the department must show a strong commitment to making this primarily a cultural exchange program rather than a moneymaking one.

Neither childcare nor American public diplomacy is something the U.S. government needs to scrimp on.
