

It's every working mother's nightmare - and it still haunts Annie McConnell

# 'I don't know if I can trust nannies again'

BY CAROLINE PHILLIPS

**Y**OU'VE endured the morning sickness, the painful birth. And you've suffered the gruelling labour of finding a nanny.

Finally you have your first chance to go out, alone, with your husband.

You leave your precious baby in the care of the warm and cheerful nanny. You worry, of course. Will she leave the landing light on?

Hours into your escape from nappies you telephone home to put your mind at rest. There is no answer. You ring your neighbour. She rings you back. Your nanny has gone. Your baby has gone.

This is what happened to Annie McConnell, a cartoonist, and her composer husband James when their 17-month-old son Freddie was taken by unqualified nanny Sarah Langford.

This week Langford was sent to jail for six weeks after appearing in court on 13 charges of deception and taking the couple's car without permission. She had taken Freddie on a 120-mile journey in a vehicle she was not insured to drive.

"Afterwards, people would say: 'Oh, that happened to a friend of mine,'" says Annie. "One came home early and saw her children getting out of her nanny's boyfriend's car, in which they'd driven without seatbelts. Others have had their credit cards stolen by nannies who went on spending sprees. Many have found nannies smoking over their charges."

Everyone has horror stories. There are the nannies who don't turn up to toddler groups as expected with the children who are supposed to be in their care. Or those who plonk children in front of a video and call it a healthy walk.

A journalist colleague returned home early to find her nanny had gone shopping, leaving her son locked in his bedroom. A film producer friend discovered that her nanny, who was supposedly taking her child swimming after nursery school, had

flicked chlorine on the little girl's eyes - to disguise the fact that she had taken her on a social outing instead. Another was upset to find that her qualified nanny was drinking all her baby's milk - with her whisky.

My sister interviewed a Croatian au pair, supposedly the 23-year-old daughter of their former ambassador to Jakarta. Later, in an interview with her husband, the same Croat explained that she was 21 and that her father was a car factory worker. Another nanny, from Australia this time, when asked if she had any questions for her potential employers, said: "Do you have any psychotic tendencies I should know about?"

When Langford first came for an interview with the McConnells, they were very impressed by her. "She seemed 100 per cent wonderful, suitable and safe," says Annie. "She had excellent references from two people - which later turned out to be false. I didn't think of checking her references verbally. As a non-experienced, first-time mother, it never occurred to me."

**L**ANGFORD was with the family for two weeks. "She was tactile and caring with Freddie and also tidy and punctual. She showed no signs of dysfunction, otherwise we'd never have left her for the day. It was being alone that flipped her. We trusted her the way people did nurse Beverly Allitt."

That day in early March 1994 was the first time the McConnells had left Freddie. Both Annie, whose Country Life cartoons lampoon the aristocracy and country set, and James work at home but on this occasion they had been invited to a business lunch in London.

"We felt happy to leave Freddie. Sarah was bubbly and loving," says Annie, sitting in their large farmhouse kitchen with an Aga and Freddie's paintings on the walls.

Annie had told Langford to take Freddie to a playgroup a mile away but at 4pm Langford rang the couple or their mobile to tell them Freddie was very ill

## Our nanny nightmare



and vomiting badly. Annie told her to take him to the doctor immediately but didn't think to ask where Langford was. Over the next three hours, the McConnells called the surgery every five minutes, only to be told that the nanny had never arrived.

"A friend checked the road between the surgery and our home to see if they'd had an accident," says Annie. "Our friend rang to say our car was missing, the nanny's car was still there and nobody was in the house. We called the local hospitals and the police, who had no accident details matching our description. We felt devastated and powerless."

Finally they rang home at 7.30pm and Langford answered the phone. "She said she'd been to the doctor's and they'd kept her waiting for three hours. She described everything from the surgery carpet to the doctor and the treatment."

When they got home, Freddie was asleep looking healthy and contented and Langford swore she'd taken Freddie to the doctor in her own car. But James noticed immediately that an extra 120 miles had been clocked up on their own car. "We sacked her on the spot," says Annie.

Next day builders nearby confirmed that Langford had

**We all have our nanny horror stories, like the one who flicked some chlorine in the baby's eyes - and said she had taken her swimming**



HOME SAFE: Annie with Freddie and (inset) yesterday's Express

driven Freddie away in their car just five minutes after they'd left and did not return during the day.

"Afterwards, I went through a lot of 'what ifs?'" says Annie. "What if my son hadn't come back... It's unimaginable the feeling that you might have lost your child, not knowing where he was, whether he was all right and having a sense that something was really wrong."

**I**DON'T like to dwell on that sort of thing. And you mustn't suddenly become over-protective. We didn't go to the police. They came to us three months ago to ask if we'd give a statement about what had happened."

The chilling reason for this was that Langford had put other children at risk. "They said we weren't the first family to whom she'd behaved like

this. She was also up for credit card fraud. The police knew she wasn't safe with children but had no legal grounds to stop her working with them. So we gave a statement about how she drove our car uninsured."

After Langford left, Annie didn't get a nanny for a few months. "It took me a long time to risk going through it again, and to start to trust a girl. I was so wary of getting another potentially dangerous nanny."

"I had trusted my instincts, so I lost faith in my judgment. The problem is, if I were to interview another Sarah again today, I'd still take her on. I was completely taken in by her. It made me worried about ever leaving my child at all."

These days Annie finds interviewing a nanny a huge ordeal because she's frightened of making another mistake. "Now I ask really impertinent questions."

Annie is angry about Langford's sentence, too. "It is scandalous for her to be sent to Holloway when she's obviously a psychiatric case. She'll be able to leave prison in a few weeks and answer any ad to go and work with children."

This has prompted Annie to call for a national register listing those who have committed offences which render them

unsuitable for work with children. "There should be regulations that allow us to check up on these people."

Annie found Langford initially through a local paper advert. But although Langford was unqualified, qualifications may not necessarily protect parents. And even getting a nanny through an agency may not provide a safeguard, for since 1995 it has not been necessary for agencies to obtain licences.

**T**HIS means that anyone can set one up and many do not bother to check references from applicants. One safeguard for parents is to see if an agency is a member of the Recruitment and Employment Services Federation.

"There should definitely be a nanny register," says Jean Birtles, author of the Top Notch Nannies' Guide, who also runs her own agency.

"We have to sift through a number of undesirable applicants and have just rejected someone who seemed highly qualified but who turned out to be a kleptomaniac extorting money from people."

"It would be better for children's safety and parents' peace of mind if there were a national register."