Lisa Oates is a graduate of Wheeling High School. In high school she was a frequent babysitter, and she also tutored elementary school students. It is fitting that she is an elementary education major with hopes of one day teaching elementary school. She also plays the flute in NIU’s band. This essay is meaningful to Lisa because the experience it describes taught her that is important to learn from one’s mistakes and ask for help when needed.

Lisa wrote this essay in John Bradley’s fall 2010 English 105 course.
A cool autumn night, a tall mahogany door. The kids chatter and giggle on the other side. This is it. I’m prepared. First aid classes, childcare articles, and my mother’s advice. Tonight is no ordinary babysitting job. Six kids. Yikes. But I’m prepared. Comfortable clothes, a bag full of crafts, and a smile.

“Ding-dong.”

Little feet pound through the house. A tiny head peeks up through the window. “She’s here!” The girl tugs open the door. A tangled mess of brown hair and a tiara. She’s dressed in a fairy princess gown, complete with wings. She stares up at me with huge, blue eyes, mouth agape. Suddenly, a grin spreads wide across her face.

“Good evening, Your Highness,” I greet cheerfully. Then I look around theatrically. “Have you seen Stephanie? Hmm, I thought she lived here.”

The girl bursts out in giggles. “No, Lisa! I am Stephanie!”

“Oh! I didn’t recognize you!” I tease. “Are you a fairy today?”

“No.” Stephanie informs me seriously, “It’s just pretend.”

I laugh as her small, sticky hand slides into mine, and she pulls me into the house. A smooth, tiled hallway. Now, a warmly colored room: a large, red sofa, an unlit fireplace, and a bowl of autumn leaves and pinecones, the sharp scent of cinnamon. Toys. Everywhere. Every inch. A bucket of crayons and markers spilled on the floor. Papers and coloring books, action figures, red and blue building blocks, a baseball, a scattered deck of cards, Barbie dolls, and little plastic shoes. Popcorn kernels crunch under my socks as Stephanie and I pass by. The TV blares. I resist the urge to obsessively begin cleaning.

Among the mess, a dark-haired boy named Blaise wrestles with an older girl for a purple marker. “No, Claudia! I need it more!” he hollers. With a final wrench, he snatches it from her grasp.

On the couch, a young boy, no older than Stephanie, munches on goldfish crackers as he watches TV. This must be Andrew, I remember.
Next to Andrew, a light-haired girl, Katherine, cuts brightly colored paper into confetti. “Fiesta!” she shouts, and she tosses a handful into the center of the room, where Claudia and Blaise are arguing over markers.

Before the other kids realize that I’m here, Stephanie drags me into the kitchen.

The kitchen contains an entirely different atmosphere. Mona rushes about. She acknowledges me with a quick smile and a polite, “Hi, Lisa! Thanks for coming!” as she sweeps through the kitchen. She scoops up a purse and a sweater and piles dirty dishes into the sink as she passes. Her friend is tall and slender, with flowing blond hair. She throws a diaper bag into my arms, prattling in a rush about baby formula and clean diapers. They’ll be home around twelve. The kids go to bed at nine. Call if I need anything.

Gotcha! No problem!

Then the door slams shut, and, suddenly, I’m alone with six wild kids. Fantastic.

A small blond boy waddles past me towards a pile of Legos. This must be Ben. Squatting down unsteadily, he snatches up a yellow block with one tiny paw and shoves it into his mouth.

“No!” I screech, as I grab his chin and gently pry the Lego out of his mouth, from which a long string of saliva oozes. “Don’t put things in your mouth,” I scold.

Ben stares at me in astonishment, and then he takes off again, tottering towards the fireplace. I scoop him up into my arms and give him a Care Bear instead.

A scream draws my attention to Stephanie, who kneels on the floor sobbing while Claudia and Katherine hover over her. I rush to them. “What’s going on?”

Claudia shrugs with a smirk on her face. “Don’t know. She just started crying. We think she’s faking.”

I crouch over Stephanie, who covers her face with her hands. Then the crying abruptly stops, soon to be replaced by giggles. “Ugh, stop horsing around,” I groan. This will be a long night.

I spend most of the time with Ben. I read him books or build block towers with him. I show him how to use crayons, but he finds more interest in stuffing them up his nose. The other kids vanish into the depths of the basement to play spies. Occasionally,
Andrew and Blaise emerge, caught in an intense battle against ninjas.

I pop in *The Lion King* to watch. We lounge on the large, red sofa, lights dimmed and TV images flashing. I hold Ben in my arms while Stephanie cuddles against my side. Her hair smells like cheese puffs. Claudia holds open a novel on her lap, still on the same page from an hour ago, when we first started the movie, and Katherine lies gracefully beside her. Blaise sits cross-legged on the floor, directly in front of the screen, chin cupped in his hands and his eyes wide.

Andrew has no interest in the movie. Instead, he falls asleep on a throw pillow, his light blond hair matting upwards. As he sleeps, he sucks on his thumb, and drool darkens the pillow.

The clock strikes nine: bedtime. The kids pretend not to notice, although I had given them a bedtime warning a half hour ago. Deep breath. “Ok guys, time for bed,” I announce. I shift a little under Stephanie’s weight and readjust my hold on Ben.

Nobody moves.

“Let’s turn off the movie. You can finish it in the morning.”

No response.

Ugh, fine. I slide out from under Stephanie’s hold and reach for the DVD remote. Click. The screen goes dark.

The kids spark into action, statues bursting to life. Blaise flies across the room and falls dramatically at my feet. “No, please, Lisa! Just thirty more minutes!”

“I don’t want to go to bed! It’s too early!” Katherine whines. “Plus, it’s Friday. My mom always lets us stay up until at least ten on the weekends.”

“And I’m not even tired!” Stephanie quips. Waking up, Andrew adds, “Me either!”

I groan, not sure what to do.

“Can I call Mom?” Claudia asks. “I bet she’ll say we can stay up later. Please?” Her hazel eyes grow huge, and she puckers out her bottom lip.

“No, your parents told me nine o’clock,” I insist. “So let’s go upstairs for bed.”

Suddenly, a large red pillow catapults across the room and whacks Claudia across the face. “Ow! Blaise!”

“It was an accident!” Blaise wails.
“No, it wasn’t! He did that on purpose!” Suddenly, hell breaks loose. Claudia launches herself over the coffee table and straight at Blaise. She and Blaise collide, tackling each other with brutal force. Katherine leaps up to assist Claudia. Cackling wildly, Stephanie joins the fray, yanking on Blaise’s hair. They laugh as they tumble around on the carpet, trying to pin each other down.

“Hey! Stop!” I holler in my best babysitter voice, “It’s time for bed!”

I place Ben down on the sofa and rush over to the other kids. I grab hold of the first kid that I find, which happens to be Claudia. I wrap my arms around her and yank hard to separate her from the mob, but she immediately springs back again. They’re a group of magnets, inseparable.

I groan; the kids ignore me.

My arms will fall off. I sit numbly on the large red sofa, cradling Ben against me. Why isn’t he asleep yet? Feet pound from upstairs. The kids are supposed to be sleeping. Loud whispers travel through the quiet house and into the dim living room.

Snickers.

Ben snoozes, eyelids half closed. Soft snores, shallow breathing. His tiny hand loosely grips the ends of my hair. Then a thump and a giggle from above. From Ben, a sniff and a shuddered sigh. I tense, holding my breath and cringing, praying that the boy would finally go to sleep. Ben slumps down again, snug in my arms. Whew!

“Dong!” The grandfather clock strikes eleven, and Ben jolts awake with a screeching cry. Mona will be home in less than an hour. I should have called her; I can’t handle this.

Someone stomps down the stairs. Claudia rounds the corner, trotting into the room, fists clenched, and eyes blinking furiously. “I’m trying to sleep, but Blaise keeps kicking me and Katherine off the bed!”

More stomping, and Blaise flies into the room. “I was not! She’s such a baby!”

Just then, a warm, stagnant odor drifts upwards from Ben. The goggling infant resumes his shrieks, diaper loaded.

Click.

A key in lock and the parents swing open the door.