

Election chatter glosses over our child-care morass ^[1]

Author: Dvorak, Petula

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EXCERPTS:

We're still waiting.

Why can we talk about roof dogs, the kiss-cam and dressage horses during election season, but not about something that affects more than 6 million American toddlers and infants every day?

I'm still waiting for someone to talk about child care. It's a mess. And whether you're a parent doing the 15-dollar-dash to get to day care before the clock goes into late-fee land or the childless worker sick of seeing your colleague run out the door every day at 5, it affects you.

Our nation takes care of its youngest citizens through a mishmash of neighborhood babysitters, high-paid nannies, off-the-grid, sketchy but affordable centers, homemade day cares run out of someone's basement and the rare and difficult-to-afford corporate center that works well for the tiny population that can get in. There are federal subsidies, state aid and tax credits, but no comprehensive system.

Just take a look at the latest mess in Virginia, where state regulations regarding the size of in-home day cares are different from county rules and, because someone just figured this out, hundreds if not thousands of families might see their children kicked out of places that work well for them.

This is the kind of stuff that craters a family's work schedule and finances, making it impossible for them to work and forcing some onto public assistance.

The funny thing about this?

We actually did this right. Once.

During World War II, when the country needed Rosie the Riveter to keep the war effort going, the United States passed the Lanham Act in 1941, which, among other things, provided more than 2,500 quality, education-based day-care centers that eventually cared for more than 1.5 million children across the country.

Yes!

Women who went to work in factories dropped off their kids for about 50 cents a day. Kids got snacks, hot lunch, reading, painting and play. Some of the centers even sent the kids home with a foil-wrapped, roasted chicken, so Mom didn't have any hot-stove time after a tough day at work.

Sounds like Sweden or something, right?

"We got it right, for the most part. Unfortunately, it was during World War II, during an emergency, as part of a war effort, and it was very clear that it was only for the war that this would happen," said Natalie Fousekis, a history professor at California State University at Fullerton who wrote a book on the wartime day cares. They were largely shut down right after the war ended.

And we haven't had a meaningful national discussion about child care since.

Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said last year that if she ever became speaker of the House again, one of her goals would be to do "for child care what we did for health-care reform."

"One of the great pieces of unfinished business is high-quality child care; I wonder why we just can't do that," Pelosi said.

Critics accused Pelosi of wanting to warehouse children in government facilities, then force parents to go to work.

Give me a break.

Earlier this year, Mitt Romney said he wants young mothers who are on government assistance to get jobs for "the dignity of work." The work requirement is something he signed into law in Massachusetts.

And most of those women want to work, for sure. Anyone who thinks raising a family on public assistance is easy hasn't seen it up close.

But because it's so hard to get quality child care that's affordable, it becomes a non-starter for many folks.

President Obama has been no better on the issue. He speaks about early-childhood education and helping working families, but somehow, the term "child care" doesn't come up.

Maybe it's because it is still such an explosive and divisive issue. When you mention child care, you hit that working mom third rail again. (See Marrisa Mayer and Anne Marie Slaughter, if you need a reminder of that debate.)

Women, who have been making huge gains in the workforce during the past four decades, are now the majority of the nation's workforce and the primary breadwinners in one out of five American households.

All of this has been achieved despite the lack of a comprehensive child-care system. The only recent nod to child care in the federal conversation is the Infant and Toddler Quality Improvement Act, introduced last month by Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.). That bill calls for more funds for state and local child-care programs, plus increased oversight regulations.

It's a start, but really all it does is add some extra stitching to the patchwork we're already struggling to keep together. And honestly, do you want Al Franken to be the only one with the guts to push for solutions?

It's time for everyone - especially women - to drop the squeamish act over the child-care conversation. It's too essential to our lives and the country's future.

Let's start talking - and demanding that our political leaders start talking, too.

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