

Taylor: A generation later, how much progress in nation's child care?

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Opinion

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Source: The Roanoke Times

Format: Article

Publication Date: 16 Aug 2015

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EXCERPTS

In the late 1990s, I wrote a workplace column for The Roanoke Times. On alternating weeks, a colleague and I explored life in the working world in 18 column inches titled, simply, "At Work."

I was a young(ish) mother of a middle-schooler then, struggling, like so many other working moms, to bring some order to the work-life balance. Inevitably, child care would creep into those columns — the latch-key syndrome; the gap in after-school care for children too old for the nursery but not yet old enough for a driver's license; the need for employer-assisted child care.

Those thoughts came flooding back recently when my now 29-year-old son, a new father living and working in Washington, D.C., texted me one morning. "No nanny today," he said. A few days later: "Nanny is sick today." Day after: "Nanny has jury duty today."

I should have prefaced this with some truth-telling: 1. Nanny is part-time; the salaries of my son and daughter-in-law can't cover the cost of a full-time nanny. 2. Son is blessed (truly!) that his employer is allowing him to work from home. 3. Son and daughter-in-law live in the 10th-most expensive city in the United States, where the raw cost of in-center child care is about \$21,950 a year.

I share all of this to pick up where I left off nearly 20 years ago, to question why the state of child care in this country appears to have progressed by only inches, not by the miles I'd envisioned back then.

- A 2013 report by Child Care Aware America, a national organization of child-care resource and referral agencies, found that the annual cost of day care for an infant exceeds the average cost of in-state tuition and fees at public colleges in 31 states.
- One-third of full-time workers globally say managing work-life has become more difficult, with parents and younger generations (read: young parents) hit hardest, according to research conducted by Ernst & Young, a multinational professional services firm.
- Employer-supported child care remains the exception, not the norm. According to the U.S. Department of Labor's National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the Private Industry in the United States, only 15 percent of private-sector workers have access to employer assistance for child care.

The state of child care in the United States was at the forefront of President Barack Obama's State of the Union address on Jan. 20. A writer for slate.com called that "an extremely important rhetorical shift — the move from child care as a mushy, emotional, frivolous extra, to a serious imperative."

We shall see.

President Bill Clinton, July 23, 1997: "Over the past decade, the number of American families with working parents has expanded dramatically. Making high-quality child care more affordable and accessible is critical to the strength of our families and to healthy child development and learning. Each of us — from businesses to religious leaders to policy-makers and elected officials — has a responsibility and an important stake in making sure that children of all ages have the best possible care available to them."

President Barack Obama, Jan. 20, 2015: "In today's economy, when having both parents in the workforce is an economic necessity for many families, we need affordable, high-quality child care more than ever. It's not a nice-to-have — it's a must-have. So it's time we stop treating child care as a side issue, or as a women's issue, and treat it like the national economic priority that it is for all of us."

Then, and now.

Inches, maybe a few yards, but certainly not miles.

-reprinted from The Roanoke Times

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