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Deans: Day care debate goes on

My boxes in the attic came out again last weekend, with their cargo of newspaper clippings, letters and mementos.

My instinct was to clean out some of the detritus of my life so my son won't have to do it when I'm gone — although I hope that will be a long while. And I know I'm reacting to the cleaning and sorting I did after my husband died and my parents moved from their house into long-term care.

I always linger over these boxes but I know others won't care much about what's in them. During many moves, I've already thrown to the recyclers and thrift shops many pounds of newspapers and clippings, clothes and books.

This time some clippings I've kept brought to mind the endless battle over what women should do with their lives. As Camera columnists Liz Ryan and Erika Stutzman wrote last week, it still goes on — no matter how much progress we think we've made.

Career columnist Ryan, writing in Business Plus, believes barriers still keep women out of the work force. She was talking about why a woman would say to her, "I'm lucky that I don't have to work."

If that woman leaves a job to raise a family, it's tough to get back in, Ryan said.

"I believe this is one of our biggest employment problems as a country," her column said. "We put up barriers for returning-to-the-workforce moms."

Stutzman, Daily Camera features editor, teed off in her Saturday Balance section column on a National Institutes of Health just-released study of day care.

"The study kicked off a debate: Do we want kids smart but bad? Good and dumb?" she wrote, pointing out that the study's methodology was flawed, and all it seemed to recommend was arranging play dates for children — not really an option for most working moms.

Also last week, I interviewed Bobbie Watson, sustainability initiative manager for the city of Boulder's Children, Youth & Families division. Her job focuses on developing a comprehensive early care and education system for Boulder County. She said 85 percent of day care facilities in the county rate mediocre. Which probably means the best ones are financially out of reach for all but the highest-earning families.

Moms worry themselves sick wondering if they have made the right decision — to go to work, to school or whatever they must do outside the home while leaving their little ones in the care of others. And many of them worry about money or their futures if they do stay home.

Even now, many years after raising my only child, I still feel a pang when I read about moms being criticized or made to feel neglectful about not staying home with their kids.

I've written about it, too, many times over the years, and the debate never seems to change much.

Eighteen years ago, in 1989, I wrote in The Sun News, Myrtle Beach, S.C.: "Women in my generation — the fortysomethings (we were then) — got caught on the cusp of change. ... The rules changed for us in midstream. Feminism opened up some other possibilities. ... Let's not go back to the '60s by confining

working mothers to dead-end, low-level jobs. Let's talk about the real issue. How can we make it possible for everyone — mommies and daddies both — to be productive, energetic career people and still have time to raise quality children?"

Women my age — I just turned 59 — were on the cusp of the dramatic change from June Cleaver to Hillary Clinton.

Our reality, and that of mothers today, is that most working moms don't have a choice. In my case, a divorce — not one I chose — meant I needed to be able to support myself and my 2-year-old. I went back to school to prepare myself for a career and have worked ever since.

Starting with Boulder Day Nursery, my son had the benefit of outstanding care as a young child, care that was available to a low-income single mom. And he turned out to be a wonderful, smart, caring, accomplished adult.

So if we're listening to Ryan, Stutzman and Watson, we should get these points:

Women should have choices about working outside the home, staying home with their kids or doing other fulfilling tasks — none should feel ashamed or embarrassed about what they need to do. And their life experiences should be welcomed as job qualifications.

Employers should make it easier for women to have families and do their jobs — flex time, job sharing, on-site day care — whatever it takes.

Day care shouldn't be just available — it should be excellent. Look at examples like Boulder Day Nursery. Make sure that providers are well paid and well trained, not just babysitters. Adapt day care to flex time schedules.

And these things can apply to daddies, too — who also must take responsibility for their kids.

Let's hope we don't have to keep writing about this problem for another 18 years.

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