

Grandmas Can Disarm the Mommy Wars

Chicago Tribune May 9 2014

Chicago Tribune

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# **It takes rearview trifocals to put mommyhood in perspective**

**By Joanne Cleaver**

*May 9, 2014*

We sent out the news and the happiness streamed back via "reply all."

"Grandparenthood is the best."

"You'll love it."

I've never received so many congratulations for doing so little. It's like ordering takeout Thanksgiving and having everyone tell you they love your candied yams. You're welcome, world! For once, I'm taking credit for something I haven't done.

I was sure that this baby girl looked just like her mother. (No, newborns don't all look the same.) As I searched through the yellowing pages of an old photo album, I found a chillingly prophetic photo taken within an hour of my daughter's birth 32 years ago. Plopped on the laminate side table next to the hospital bed in which I sat, smiling and disheveled after bringing her into the world, was a single-layer chocolate cake, frosted, with a "o" candle stranded in the middle, like an aged tombstone listing into a field of brown sludge.

That's right: I baked and brought a birthday cake to my first baby's birth. What was I thinking?

I vaguely remember: It would be amusing to have a pastry pun to amp up the party atmosphere of pushing out a baby. But there was more to it than sharing some cake. It was my way of telling the staff that I was a planner. Organized! Prepared! It was OK to let my husband and me take this baby home!



I thought I could launch a freelance career and a family at the same time, and I did. But what I didn't know was that I was about to be drafted into the mommy wars.

You remember the mommy wars. The first shot was fired in the feminist revolution of the 1970s when going to work was considered a revolutionary act — well, if you were going to work at a job that was not teaching or nursing. The moms who stayed home or never took a paying job positioned themselves as the ones who really cared about their kids. "I couldn't delegate the most important job in the world to anyone else," they said as they scheduled PTA meetings at 10 a.m. on Wednesdays.

"My brain would atrophy if I stayed home all day with people who can't talk in full sentences or control their bodily functions," said the full-time working mommies, who wielded their day planners like storm-trooper shields.

I chose a third way — part-time work, from home — and found myself collateral damage. Moms with 9-to-5 office jobs considered me a pretender. Moms who stayed home considered me a traitor.

Shrapnel hit thick and often. I had a baby-sitting exchange with another young mom and used some of my hours to attend a corporate annual meeting for a writing assignment. When I arrived to pick up my daughter, the husband announced that she'd just taken her first steps, which I'd missed because I was out working.

Like all tribal warfare, the mommy wars were taken up by each successive generation of moms. The economy has evolved. What hasn't are the discussions about guilt and bonding and public policy for parents.

Meanwhile, the veterans of the first round have become grandparents. And guess what?

There's no such thing as Grammy Wars.

That's because grandmas see in their rearview trifocals what didn't matter. It didn't matter if they worked full time or stayed at home or found a middle way. What matters, grandmas know, is that you love your kids and give them the best mom you have to give. That's it.

Hoisting stay-at-home moms onto a pedestal doesn't matter. Calculating the supposed market value of the activities of at-home moms (cook + chauffeur + gardener + nanny = a theoretical salary of \$125,000!) illogically and fatally tries to co-opt workplace terminology to justify what is a responsibility, not a job. Constantly rebalancing work and life is like trying to be on both ends of a teeter-totter at the same time.

Bring your best self to all that mothering requires of you and chances are things will be fine. Really, that's it.

I figured this out when I bought an hour of quiet for a phone interview by pouring an entire box of Cheerios over my 9-month-old's head as she sat in her playpen. Happy (if perplexed) baby. Deadline met, happy client. Work-life balance? I was vacuuming Cheerios for a month, and that was just from diapers.

If only I'd known all this before my daughter was born, when I teed up the second of the two birth-day caloric casualties.

I baked an army of miniature gingerbread girls and boys and frosted them pink and blue, respectively. The boys were packed in one doily-lined shoe box and the girls in another. The boys' box was tied with blue ribbon and the girls' box was tied with pink ribbon. The plan, I explained several times, I am sure, to my husband, was that he would announce our baby's arrival to his co-workers with the appropriate cookies.

Secret agenda: irrelevant-gender snacking upon arrival home from the hospital. We came home, I brewed coffee, but there was no blue-ribboned shoe box on the counter.

"Where are the boy cookies?" I asked my husband.

"I took them to work," he said.

"Why? The cookies were supposed to tell everyone what we had! What did you say?" I asked.

"That we had a baby," he said, "And that everybody's fine."

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