



This Is Us?

How TV Does and Doesn't
Get Men's Caregiving

Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media
If she can see it, she can be it.™


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Executive Summary

Americans watch *a lot* of television. Their households consume an average of two to eight hours a day, depending on how it's measured.¹ It makes sense, then, that television is an important force for how we understand and treat ourselves and others. That includes how we come to understand parenting and caregiving, including caring for children, aging parents, people with disabilities, and more. In recent decades, we've seen fathers like Homer Simpson (*The Simpsons*, Fox) and Phil Dunphy (*Modern Family*, ABC) delightfully stumble and surprisingly shine in their caregiving roles, and we've watched Uncle Phil (*Fresh Prince*, NBC) step up to care for his nephew, and Danny Tanner (*Full House*, ABC) fill his role as a single dad. And for many, Mister Rogers (*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, PBS) cared for viewers directly, addressing them in their living rooms as they watched.

But what is the current state of caregiving on television? In particular, how are men being shown as caregivers? How much do current shows validate and reinforce rigid models of male caregiving linked to unhealthy masculinity, or how do shows take the opposite tack and afford real-world men a roadmap toward “new fatherhood,” more balanced relationships with their partners, and positive relationships with their dependents? These portrayals are important for understanding men's actual caregiving. They likely also shape debates around public policies that affect those who are in care of others.²

To answer these questions, we analyzed 225 popular scripted broadcast and streaming television shows from 2013 to 2020. From the nearly one thousand characters we identified as caregivers, one overall finding stuck out: While men are depicted doing hands-on caregiving at higher rates than in the past, they are too often shown as abusive, incompetent, and/or emotionally distant. These persistent tropes point to the need for more stories that show men as imperfect but connected, emotionally responsive, invested, and equitable caregivers. Given that television has the power to shape our culture, we hope that this report will inspire new and reimagined stories about what caregiving can look like for the next generation.

Main Findings:

WHO DOES THE CAREGIVING?

- ▷ In recent years, men and women were shown as caregivers at a similar rate in popular TV shows.
- ▷ Most caregivers on popular scripted TV shows were portrayed by white actors. However, caregivers portrayed by people of color were increasingly more common. From 2013 to 2020, portrayals of caregiving by people of color increased from 21% to 42%.
- ▷ Female caregivers were doing one-third more on-screen caregiving tasks (such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, play) than male caregivers.
- ▷ In more recent TV scripted shows, men were doing more housework, but it was gender-stereotypical housework (such as fixing a sink, grilling, or painting) and not housework associated with domesticity (such as cleaning, cooking, or laundry).

TROPES: ABUSIVE, APPRENTICE, AND ABSENT DADS?

- ▷ Male caregivers were nearly two times more likely than female caregivers to be shown as incompetent — a perpetuation of the “apprentice dad” trope.
- ▷ Male caregivers were one and a half times more likely than female caregivers to be emotionally abusive, and four times more likely to be physically abusive — a perpetuation of the “abusive dad” trope.
- ▷ Male caregivers were less likely than female caregivers to be depicted as affectionate, supportive, or offering emotional care.
- ▷ Just as representations matter, so do words. We chose male *caregivers* as a broader definition of the many kinds of caregiving men do, including but not exclusive to being fathers. This includes caring of elderly parents, siblings, other family members, adopted children, as well as the diversity of biological and social fathers.



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Recommendations

Our analysis of nearly a decade of popular scripted television programs suggests that representations of male caregivers are often limited and stereotypical. In many ways, these depictions fail to reflect the realities that men face in caregiving roles. Because these representations contribute to gender socialization and communicate norms and expectations surrounding fatherhood, we encourage the industry to more fully develop the characterization of male caregivers in future programming. Offering more positive parenting role models would help to combat some of the pernicious myths of masculinity that distance men from caregiving, and would allow men to envision stronger and more authentic connections in their caregiving roles. Put differently: “If men can see it, they can be it.”

Several programs are already moving in this direction, offering gripping and nuanced characterizations of male caregivers. For instance, multigenerational family dramas like *This Is Us* show varied paths to fatherhood and diverse caregiving arrangements. Male caregivers aren’t idealized in these roles; rather, they grapple with the challenges and failures in ways that are genuine, evoke empathy, and illustrate paths to personal growth. Key plot points in the show include the family patriarch, Jack, overcoming alcoholism and learning to better cope with the pressures of fatherhood; Miguel working through a chilly relationship with Jack’s adult children after marrying their mother, Rebecca; William and his son Randall struggling to forge a relationship after William gave Randall up at birth; Randall establishing a secure and loving relationship with his adopted daughter, Deja; Toby grappling with his son’s disability, his own mental health, and the economic pressures of being a working parent; and Kevin navigating a complicated co-parenting relationship after an unplanned pregnancy. Over the course of the series, relationships are formed, stress-tested, and sometimes dissolved — and caregiving is navigated across these changes. We think these examples offer a solid foundation on which future programming can build.

Based on our analysis, we offer the following six recommendations when developing roles for male caregivers in future programming:

#1 Break Down Gender Stereotypes Around Housework

Move beyond one-dimensional portrayals of male caregivers that emphasize their unsuitability for parenting. Show men who are emotionally present and invested in relationships as they engage in care work. Highlight the benefits of care work for men in terms of well-being, social-emotional connection, and sense of purpose. Attribute stereotypically feminized traits associated with care work to male characters; understand that male characters can embody a balanced mix of personal traits.

#2 Disrupt the Male-Breadwinner Model

Show effective co-parenting and networks or communities of care. Dual-income families are the norm nowadays,⁵⁰ but representations of co-parenting were relatively rare in the programs we analyzed. Instead, women were responsible for more of the “daily grind” type of caregiving activities. Beyond this, many of the well-intended but bumbling “apprentice dads” we identified were divorced or widowed, suggesting the only reason men might take on an expanded range of care work is because they are forced into it out of necessity. Future programming can add realism to caregiving roles by grappling more fully with co-parenting — both among committed partners and separated partners.

#3 Help Male Caregivers Up When They Get Knocked Down, Again

Depict the real challenges of caregiving. Show male caregivers encountering obstacles, experiencing setbacks, and failing to live up to the ideals of caregiving. Model resilience, vulnerability, and paths forward, thereby combating expectations that men present themselves always as strong, confident, and infallible — expectations that stem from unhealthy masculinity. Normalize the parental learning curve. Rather than leaning into tired tropes of isolated “apprentice dads” or heroic, go-it-alone fathers, show male caregivers productively engaging their psychosocial support networks in times of need.

#4 Model Male Accountability

Contextualize abusive or absentee caregivers and their consequences. Consider demonstrating the process of setting and enforcing healthy boundaries in difficult caregiving relationships. Avoid storylines with simplistic reconciliation narratives wherein family members are forgiven simply because “family is family,” without much effort on the part of the abusive or absentee caregiver to change their behavior, seek therapy, or acknowledge the harm done.

#5 Diversify Male Caregivers

Our analysis points to some differences in representations of male characters across racial and ethnic groups, some of which are favorable and some of which are less so (e.g., unsympathetic authoritarian Asian fathers). As noted prior, male caregivers of color have historically been portrayed in a more negative light than white male caregivers, although this is changing. Care should be taken to avoid negative, racially stereotyped depictions of caregiving, and to instead conceptualize caregiving through an intersectional lens. Working-class caregivers also tend to be portrayed in a negative light — as less engaged and emotionally unavailable — meaning there’s room for improvement here as well.

#6 Embrace More Storytelling About Care and Caregiving

Tell more stories that draw inspiration from the ups and downs of real life caregiving. Audiences respond positively to complex stories of caregiving. Telling stories about people who are in the complicated business of caring and caregiving reflect that reality, and television plays a key role in affirming how central caregiving is in our lives. COVID-19 and its attendant economic and social upheaval have highlighted caregiving’s centrality in society — for the elderly, for those households that lost family members, for households that lost work, for low-income households, and for the households that have always struggled to have childcare. Good, engaging stories can be found in these struggles. Indeed, these are human stories that affect us all.

BROADER IMPACTS

Shifting media representations and public understanding of caregiving roles for men will surely have broader social impacts. More positive or nuanced representations of male caregiving can alter cultural norms and expectations around how families navigate care responsibilities and promote healthy co-parenting. Establishing a culture of care and equality in caregiving between men and women are important factors in increasing women's representation in the workplace and supporting women's professional success.⁵¹ For example, research on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the household division of labor suggests that additional care responsibilities stemming from school and childcare closures fell disproportionately on women.⁵² However, in families with greater co-paternal involvement in childcare, women fared better in the workplace. Women who reported doing most or all of the childcare work in their home had about a 50% chance of dropping out of the workforce, compared with about 15% for women in homes where childcare duties were evenly divided between partners.⁵³ This example highlights the importance of co-parenting and shared caregiving for healthy and successful families.

Increased attention on male caregiving can also influence public policy, both by shaping policy makers' perspectives on the needs and experiences of American families and by sparking public demand for family policy that supports expanded caregiving roles for men. For instance, male caregivers would benefit from greater availability of paternity leave, particularly paid leave; it can help them establish an early bond with their children and support their partners at a critical stage in child development.⁵⁴ Research suggests family policy often overlooks low-income fathers in particular, making this group an important intervention point for family-policy advocates.⁵⁵ Increased public attention to care work might also catalyze support for policies directed at the rising and often unmanageable costs of childcare.⁵⁶ In these respects, there's a lot at stake in improving the quality and realism of representations of male caregivers in entertainment media. For more information about structural solutions aimed at supporting care work, see Promundo's [State of the World's Fathers](#).

Pitfalls in Representing Male Caregivers:

Think Twice about These Common Tropes and Stereotypes

Stories about male caregivers often rely on one-dimensional tropes and/or stereotypes about gender and race. We offer a checklist to identify representation pitfalls that rely on negative stereotypes about men as caregivers in film and television:

THE APPRENTICE DAD

The “apprentice dad” is portrayed as a fish out of water when it comes to parenting. This type of dad is often presented in comedic terms that highlight how men struggle when they operate outside of their “normal sphere” and take on more caregiving responsibilities. In this study, male caregivers were two times more likely than female caregivers to be depicted as following caregiving instructions given by a co-parent or partner, and nearly two times as likely to be portrayed as incompetent.

Does this film/episode include the “apprentice dad” trope?

- A male caregiver is incompetent at simple tasks, or must be instructed by his partner to carry out basic caregiving tasks, and that incompetence or instruction is the punchline of a joke.
- A male caregiver provides care only out of necessity, due to the death of their partner or an acrimonious divorce.

THE ABUSIVE DAD

The “abusive dad” is portrayed as aggressive, violent, punitive, and sometimes sexually deviant – often an extreme manifestation of unhealthy masculine traits. This trope is typically used to highlight the danger that men can pose to children. In this study, we found that although abuse was uncommon in depictions of male caregivers, they were four times more likely than female caregivers to be physically abusive.

Does this film/episode include the “abusive dad” trope?

- A male caregiver is emotionally abusive or physically abusive, and
- the trauma inflicted by the abuse is unacknowledged, ignored, or rationalized by other adult characters; other adult characters gaslight the abused party, or
- the behavior of the abusive figure is justified or superficially exonerated, and the abused party offers forgiveness without much effort on the part of the abuser to change their behavior, seek therapy, or acknowledge the harm done, or
- the abuser’s backstory of abuse is used to justify their current abusive behavior, without acknowledgment of the intergenerational trauma dynamics at work.

THE ABSENTEE DAD

The “absentee dad” is portrayed as abdicating fatherhood altogether. Sometimes he abandons his children for selfish reasons; other times he’s portrayed as a workaholic who spends most of his time outside of the home. A story is less likely to explain the absence of a dad than the absence of a mom because negligence is more incongruent with notions of motherhood than notions of fatherhood. In many stories, the absence of a father figure fuels a young characters’ heroic actions, because they have no adult supervision.

Does this film/episode include the “absentee dad” trope?

- A male caregiver ignores or is uninterested in the care receiver,
- because of work responsibilities, or to escape caregiving to pursue his own dreams, or
- for reasons left unexplained.

VIOLENT PROTECTOR

The “violent protector” portrays a male caregiver who focuses on protecting his family against physical threats, rather than a male caregiver engaged in care and authentic connection. They threaten or enact unwarranted violence in an attempt to “protect” the people for whom they care – for example, a father who brings out his shotgun when his daughter’s date picks her up.

Does this film/episode include the “violent protector” trope?

- A male caregiver threatens violence to protect someone in a paternalistic nature, without cause, or
- by creating the situation through their own actions, or
- views all strangers as threats to those they must protect.

THE MAN-BOX DAD

The “man-box dad” is portrayed to act in ways that reinforce a rigid mentality about what it means to be a man. This trope serves as a hypermasculine model of what a male caregiver should look like and what is acceptable.

Does this film/episode include the “man-box dad”?

- A male caregiver is self-sufficient and unwilling to rely on others;
- acts tough;
- is physically attractive without effort;
- adheres to rigid masculine gender roles (especially with housework and chores);
- is intolerant of LGBTQIA+ identities;
- is hypersexual;
- and is overly controlling (especially over his household and the women in his life).

“This Is Us?”: By The Numbers

These indices compare statistics about parent characteristics to representations of parenthood in popular scripted TV programs between 2013 and 2020. For details about the analysis, see the [full report](#).

Percentage of fathers experiencing work-life conflict in 1977: 35

[Source: Families and Work Institute](#)

Percentage of fathers experiencing work-life conflict in 2008: 60

[Source: Families and Work Institute](#)

Percentage of male caregivers on popular scripted TV shows shown struggling to balance work and caregiving responsibilities: <1

[Source: This Is Us?](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Authentic portrayals of male caregivers should include the challenges of balancing work and caregiving. At the root of this conflict is a desire to spend more time engaged in care work. According to Pew Research Center's 2013 study on fatherhood in the United States, fathers are less satisfied than mothers with the amount of time they routinely spend with their children.

Hours per week fathers spent doing household chores in 1965: 4

[Source: Pew Research Center](#)

Hours per week fathers spent doing household chores in 2011: 10

[Source: Pew Research Center](#)

Share of all household chores on popular scripted TV shows carried out by men: 31

[Source: This Is Us?](#)

Share of all household chores on popular scripted TV shows carried out by women: 69

[Source: This Is Us?](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Fathers and male caregivers can work toward a more equitable distribution of household labor. Studies show that more egalitarian distributions of household labor between parents impact the choices children make later in life — e.g., increasing the likelihood that female children select nonstereotypical courses of study and occupations.

Percentage of American children with an incarcerated parent in 2017: 7

Source: National Institute of Corrections

Percentage of popular scripted TV shows featuring an incarcerated parent: 2

Source: This Is Us?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Parents who are incarcerated can maintain healthy relationships with their children. Not only would modeling these relationships increase representation for a largely overlooked group, but studies show that participation in skills-based parenting programs may decrease recidivism. Also, consider the discriminatory patterns of incarceration. For example, according to the Economy Policy Institute, one-third of imprisoned fathers of Black children committed property crimes or technical violations, such as failure to show up for a court date or an appointment with a probation officer, failure to meet other conditions of release (e.g., steady employment), or failure to pay traffic tickets or similar fines.

Percentage of Americans who say it is “extremely important” for fathers to provide emotional support for their children: 52

Source: Pew Research Center

Share of emotional connection during care work shown by men on popular scripted TV shows: 41

Source: This Is Us?

Share of emotional connection during care work shown by women on popular scripted TV shows: 59

Source: This Is Us?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Ninety-three percent of American fathers say they talk with their child about their day at least several times a week, according to a 2011 study by the Pew Research Center. Show fathers taking part in their children's day-to-day lives and establishing an emotional connection with them.

Percentage of families living in poverty in the U.S. in 2020: 11.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Percentage of caregivers living in poverty on popular scripted TV shows: <1

Source: This Is Us?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In 2020, eleven million children lived in poverty in the United States. Earlier estimates suggest about two and a half million of these children are homeless. Bring attention to the root causes of these issues and the policy infrastructure designed to address them. Include the importance of food assistance programs, housing support, school funding, and health care programs for struggling families.

Percentage of children with at least one immigrant parent in the U.S. in 2017: 25

Source: The Urban Institute

Percentage of caregivers that were immigrants on popular scripted TV shows: <1

Source: This Is Us?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

A majority of Americans (68 percent) view openness to people from other countries as a defining characteristic of the United States. Showing immigrant families is a powerful way to humanize historically marginalized groups and to diminish the conceptualization of foreign people as the "other."

Percentage of of LGBT adults who are parents: 35

Source: Pew Research Center

Percentage of caregivers identified as LGBTQIA+ on popular scripted TV shows: 4

Source: This Is Us?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

According to a 2019 poll from Pew Research Center, a majority of Americans (61 percent) support same-sex marriage. Including same-sex couples and diverse LGBTQIA+ families in programming normalizes for viewers a growing demographic of caregivers.

Appendix

Types of care tasks shown among caregivers on popular TV shows:

	DESCRIPTION	PERCENTAGE OF CAREGIVERS
Emotional Care	Providing emotional support for the care receiver, such as listening to their problems, consoling, calming, or giving advice.	29.0%
Feminine Work	Domestic tasks traditionally associated with feminine gender roles, such as cooking, laundry, or cleaning.	11.7%
Masculine Work	Domestic tasks traditionally associated with masculine gender roles, such as handiwork, car maintenance, or grilling.	2.8%
Transportation	Providing transportation for the care receiver.	8.5%
Logistical Tasks	Handling the logistical tasks associated with caregiving, such as managing a schedule, planning a birthday party, or making a doctor's appointment.	18.2%
Play	Having fun with the care receiver.	16.6%
Discipline	Reprimanding, punishing, or enforcing rules.	9.9%
Physical Care	Managing the care receiver's physical needs, such as feeding someone who cannot feed themselves, changing diapers, or carrying a baby.	7.3%

Types of care behaviors displayed by caregivers on popular TV shows:

	DESCRIPTION	PERCENTAGE OF CAREGIVERS
Instructed	The caregiver needs to be reminded or told how to do simple caregiving tasks.	2.3%
Affectionate	The caregiver shows physical affection to the care receiver, such as hugging, or verbal expressions of love.	41.5%
Supportive	The caregiver shows outward support for the caregiver's choices, accomplishments, goals, or behaviors.	37.1%
Clingy	The caregiver is overbearing to the care receiver, to the care receiver's detriment, such as not letting them go out with their friends because they don't want to be left alone.	4.0%
Indifferent	The caregiver ignores the care receiver, but not in a way that creates obvious harm, such as a parent attending a soccer game but then reading a book rather than paying attention.	8.6%
Incompetent	The caregiver makes obvious mistakes linked to not knowing how to care for the receiver adequately, such as not knowing basic information about the care receiver's life or household routines.	5.4%

Harmful behaviors by caregivers on popular TV shows:

	DESCRIPTION	PERCENTAGE OF CAREGIVERS
Emotional Abuse	The caregiver manipulates, belittles, gaslights, or humiliates the care receiver.	3.9%
Physical Abuse	The caregiver physically harms the care receiver.	1.3%
Violent Protector	The caregiver threatens or enacts unwarranted violence in an attempt to "protect" the care receiver, such as a father threatening to harm a daughter's date.	3.0%
Neglect	The caregiver does not meet the care receiver's basic needs.	5.3%

Obstacles caregivers may face on popular TV shows:

	DESCRIPTION	PERCENTAGE OF CAREGIVERS
Struggling to Balance Care and Finances	Experiences difficulty handling the financial responsibilities of care work.	5.9%
Struggling to Balance Care and Work	The caregiver finds it difficult to manage the demands of both care work and their job.	6.7%
Struggling to Balance Care and a Social Life	The caregiver finds it difficult to maintain a social life because of the responsibilities and obligations of care work.	1.0%

ABOUT THE GEENA DAVIS INSTITUTE ON GENDER IN MEDIA

Founded in 2004 by Academy Award Winning Actor Geena Davis, the Institute is the only research-based organization working collaboratively within the entertainment industry to create gender balance, foster inclusion and reduce negative stereotyping in family entertainment media.

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ABOUT EQUIMUNDO: CENTER FOR MASCULINITIES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Equimundo works to achieve gender equality and social justice by transforming intergenerational patterns of harm and promoting patterns of care, empathy and accountability among boys and men throughout their lives. Equimundo has worked internationally and in the US since 2011 to engage men and boys as allies in gender equality, promote healthy manhood, and prevent violence. Previously called Promundo-US, the organization's work was born out of community-based and evidence-based work to engage men and boys in gender equality and nonviolent manhood in numerous settings in Latin America, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and North America.

Learn more about Equimundo by
visiting www.equimundo.org