



REPRESENTATION REVOLUTION TOOLKIT

FOCUS ON REPRESENTATION OF CAREGIVING

RESEARCH BASED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTENT CREATORS

Television content created and viewed in the U.S. offers an incomplete picture of how people in this country experience care, leaving many who provide or depend on certain types of care — especially related to aging and disability — feeling alone, unseen, and undervalued. The few stories that make it to air capture only a small slice of the kinds of care relationships and configurations that exist across the spectrum of U.S. families and communities, and these stories often leave out nuances and challenges shared across these groups.

The Institute in partnership with [Caring Across Generations](#) conducted research to identify what we do see on TV in terms of care versus what we do not see, why that matters, and what we can do about it. The study analyzed all broadcast, cable, and streaming scripted TV shows from 2021 available in the U.S. Of those 608 shows, just 64 included storylines prominently featuring caregiving. We define “caregiving” as activities such as emotional support, management of finances, and assistance with everyday tasks to help a dependent individual of any age go about their life.

Key Findings

- Care-related experiences were vastly underrepresented in scripted television content produced and viewed in the U.S. When care did appear, 75% of storylines highlighted parenting; care for older and disabled characters is rarely depicted.
- Aging and disability care tended to be portrayed more as “women’s work,” with mothers of disabled children often shown to carry a heavier “care load” than fathers.
- Storylines featuring care related to aging and disability lacked diversity and overwhelmingly reflected the experiences of white, heteronormative nuclear families.
- Representation of aging-related care at home, as opposed to nursing facilities, was not the norm.
- Common care challenges — such as financial strain, balancing care with a job or personal life, and physical and mental health impacts on family caregivers — were often missing.
- Many very common care-related activities — such as helping someone shower, dress, or eat; preparing food; cleaning the house; and managing medication or paying bills — were largely absent in care-related stories on TV.
- Portrayals of care related to aging and disability implicitly reinforced ageist and ableist narratives that older adults and disabled people lack agency. These portrayals rarely showed older and disabled characters having influence over their own care.
- Storylines almost never (less than 0.01% of episodes) mentioned any type of public or workplace policy that characters relied on, such as paid leave or Medicaid. Instead, stories tended to highlight care solutions rooted in personal responsibility (20%).

Recommendations:

Based on the findings of this study, we offer the following recommendations to television writers, showrunners, producers, and other creatives when it comes to developing new storylines:

- **Make Home-Based Aging and Disability Care More Visible:** When stories feature older adults and disabled characters, show these characters being actively supported in their homes by family, friends, and paid care workers in ways that uphold the care recipient's independence and agency. Normalize the full range of care—from more “light touch” support, like grocery shopping, to more intensive medical and administrative tasks. This inclusion can go a long way toward destigmatizing aging and disability care.
- **Tell More Diverse Care Stories:** Care looks different across different groups, but we see a very narrow representation of care experiences on TV. Integrate more care stories into shows featuring BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and socioeconomically diverse characters, doing so in a way that reflects both the unique value systems and specific challenges faced by caregivers and people with care needs in these communities.
- **Show Characters Experiencing Common Care Challenges:** Many common challenges that caregivers and people with care needs face are largely absent from television. Add more dimension to care stories by exploring the nuances around challenges caused by systemic barriers, like the cost of care, juggling jobs and care responsibilities, or balancing caregiving and one's own health or personal life. Utilize the drama and the humor in these situations to add stakes and enrich characters' journeys.
- **Show More Caregiving Activities:** Fundamental and everyday caregiving tasks are rarely depicted on television. As a complement to the more relational acts of companionship and checking in, find ways to also show the full range of daily support that caregivers provide — for example, helping someone with their grooming or managing their medication. Even if these actions are not the focus of a story, simply integrating them into the action of scenes will go a long way in contributing to a more authentic and holistic picture of care.
- **Model Caregiving Aspirations:** TV can help people see how things could be easier. When appropriate, highlight the kinds of programs that do (or could) help characters provide and access care. Show caregiver characters taking advantage of things like respite support or care stipends. Use world-building to illustrate an environment that makes care more accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

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