

**MOMS F1RST**

Rewriting Motherhood: How TV Represents Moms and What We Want To See Next

Although many factors contribute to the persistent belief that moms who work should also be their families' primary caregivers, in this report we are interested in the degree to which fictionalized portrayals of mothers in media reinforce or disrupt this reality. Given the influence of popular media on social norms and expectations, in this study we investigate the "cultural meaning of motherhood," as told in scripted television. The study explores whether those portrayals reflect the diverse experiences of mothers in the U.S. and if those representations speak to structural changes that would benefit moms and increase gender equality.

More accurate and authentic depictions of motherhood in entertainment media can positively change beliefs about unpaid labor, caregiving roles and responsibilities, working motherhood, and what the "ideal" mother looks like. And these beliefs can impact not just individuals' behaviors and moms' mental health but also public understanding and demand for social services and workplace policies to address sexist systems.

Main findings:

Our analysis of scripted television programs from 2022 that feature mothers in the title cast finds authentic portrayals of motherhood intermingle with portrayals that reproduce unrealistic expectations for moms, likely contributing to the guilt and shame they experience, while setting fathers up for failure too. The following key findings represent opportunities for more realistic portrayals of mothers on television.

Moms on TV are mostly white, young, and thin.

Of all TV moms of kids under age 18, 57.5% are white, 23.8% are Black, 9.2% are Latina, and 7.0% are Asian or Pacific Islander. Only 1.8% are fat, 6.2% are queer, and no moms are disabled — a stark contrast to the demographics of the American population. An intersectional analysis of motherhood highlights the potential for more diverse depictions of motherhood on-screen that reflect moms in reality.

Why we say “fat”

We use the word “fat” as a value-neutral descriptor that is not rooted in medical practices (such as “obese” or “overweight”), nor is it suggestive of being outside of some sort of “norm” or “average” (such as “plus size” or “bigger”). Destigmatizing the word “fat” helps to combat anti-fat bias.

When a TV family has a clear breadwinner, nearly 9 out of 10 times it is a dad.

In real life, the myth that moms’ salaries are not necessary to their families’ finances is pervasive, untrue, and limits moms’ earning potentials. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, among families with children ages 6–17 in the U.S. 44.4% of mothers earned at least half of the family income, with another 24.8% earning at least a quarter of it. TV does not reflect this reality.

The realities of childcare are invisible on TV.

Only 1 in 5 TV parents with kids under the age of 11 mentioned any form of childcare. The rest of the time, audiences are left to assume that these children are cared for safely and effortlessly. This glosses over the difficulties of securing, coordinating, and affording childcare. In reality, 85% of primary caregivers in the U.S. reported that their focus at work and commitment to work are negatively affected due to challenges with childcare.

TV homes are spotless, but we almost never see the work involved to keep them that way.

Less than 1 in 10 TV parents had a messy house, and yet only 15.0% were shown doing domestic tasks like cleaning. In the real world, research shows that even when both partners have jobs, 70% of moms take on more domestic tasks and more of the mental load — the cognitive effort that goes into the invisible tasks necessary to run a household. This is a shared experience among the majority of moms in the U.S., and yet it is invisible on TV. Furthermore, when domestic tasks were shown on TV, they were carried out by a mom twice as often as a dad. These disparities reinforce pervasive gender roles that relegate mothers and sideline fathers, even though surveys show that, in reality, dads want to be more involved.

TV moms are effortlessly attractive.

Over three times as many moms were depicted to be desirable to the viewer (or desirable to other characters) as were characterized as unattractive. Nearly 8 out of 10 moms were slender, as were 6 of every 10 moms with a child under the age of one. The necessary steps to achieving this level of physical beauty are not shown on-screen. TV moms rarely explain how they can afford beauty products, flattering clothes, and a gym membership or how they find the time to apply a full face of makeup, style their hair, iron their clothes, and exercise regularly. These unrealistic standards broadcast a message that attractiveness is effortless and affordable and thus should be attainable for the everyday mom.



Recommendations

Given these findings, we present the following recommendations to TV executives, producers, and writers, as well as to all of the moms who aren't seeing themselves on-screen. Moms First (experts on the support moms need to thrive) and the Geena Davis Institute (experts on the entertainment industry) are eager to support entertainment industry leaders in their efforts to more accurately portray motherhood on television.

Television executives and producers

Provide flexible work options for writers. Those most qualified to write realistic stories about motherhood are moms themselves. However, given the precarity of jobs in TV writing, it is not easy for writers who are also moms to navigate the industry. Flexible and hybrid work schedules will provide moms with more opportunities to succeed as writers.

Invest in childcare and gender-neutral paid family leave for employees. Without affordable childcare, moms cannot work. Supporting parents with expanded childcare benefits and with gender-neutral paid family leave can help attract, retain, and advance women in the workforce. Moms First is available to provide guidance and recommendations to employers when designing their childcare and paid leave policies.

Cast mom characters with more diverse backgrounds and appearances. The white, straight, thin TV mom has never been a reflection of reality. However, even as we see more diversity on TV, nearly half of mom characters still fit this description. Challenge this by showing moms of color, queer moms, fat moms, disabled moms, and moms who do not look perfectly styled at all times. Organizations like The Geena Davis Institute can help assess your progress with this goal.

Television writers

Integrate the problems facing moms today into storylines. The structural and cultural problems that moms are facing need attention in order for policy- and decision-makers to take them seriously. Show parents grappling with things like the current childcare crisis and the need for paid leave.

Represent the inescapable realities of motherhood. We recognize that every line of dialogue in a television show must serve a purpose, and that writers may not prioritize explaining things like childcare if a scene does not explicitly call for it. However, for real-world moms of young kids, their responsibilities and concerns for their children are an integral part of their lives, which should be present when writing mom characters, even when their role as a mother may not be central to the plot of the show.

View moms through an intersectional lens. Our findings suggest that TV moms lack diversity at the intersection of disability, sexual orientation, and body size. Write and cast more moms of all races and ethnicities who have disabilities, are queer, and have a range of body sizes.

Expand your perspectives of motherhood. As we have shown, the TV mom has evolved over time and has never truly reflected reality. Therefore, the specific details that can best represent motherhood could be better understood by looking not at other TV characters for inspiration, but at real-world moms. Follow moms on social media, read books written by moms, support organizations like Moms First that advocate for moms, and talk to real moms who can tell you what they would like to see on TV.

Moms outside of the industry

Reflect. Moms often find themselves feeling inadequate for not living up to unrealistic standards. Reflect on how you may have internalized the expectations set by TV and larger social structures.

Change the narrative. Share your own experiences of motherhood with friends, loved ones, fellow parents, your social media networks, and policymakers.

Here are some things we want to see more of on TV. What do you want to see?

1. Fat moms.

Our report found nearly 8 out of 10 moms on TV were slender.

2. Moms who ask for help.

Sacrifice is intrinsic to parenthood but shouldn't always fall to moms on TV. Show moms asking for help as a model for change.

3. Moms who repeat outfits.

Real-world moms repeat outfits.

4. Homes with childproofing.

If shows feature young children, show home details that reflect this, like childproofing.

5. Moms in school.

Many parents decide to return to school after having kids.

6. Disabled moms of color.

There were no disabled moms in the TV episodes sampled for this report. When casting disabled moms, ensure racial diversity, too.

7. Dads as equal partners.

Surveys show today's dads want to be more involved.

8. Moms with their roots showing.

Current beauty standards present unrealistic expectations for women to have styled and treated hair, clear skin, and flawless makeup.

9. **Moms who struggle (or struggled) with infertility.**

About 1 in 10 women have difficulty getting or staying pregnant.

10. **Messy moms, dads, and homes.**

Less than 1 in 10 TV parents had a messy house, and yet only 15.0% were shown doing domestic tasks like cleaning. Show us more clutter.

11. **Babysitters.**

Our report found only 1 in 5 TV parents with kids under the age of 11 mentioned any form of childcare.

12. **Stories from writers who are moms themselves.**

Those most qualified to write realistic stories about motherhood are moms themselves.