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NOVEMBER 2026

Present but Punchlines

Fathers in Children's Television

GEENA DAVIS INSTITUTE

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Foreword

There is no question that fathers have become more salient in culture in recent decades. But a question remains: What kind of fathers? After all, visibility cuts both ways. A father can be highly visible in our public discourse and still be diminished by it. He can be featured in Newsweek as an exemplar of the "Deadbeat Dad." He can be on every screen and still be told, in a thousand small ways, that he is the spare parent, the backup, the bumbling assistant. As the authors of this report write, "Media portrayals of fathers do more than reflect cultural attitudes — they help shape how audiences understand fathers' roles, responsibilities, and capabilities."

In other words, we often get the fathers we describe.

This report is based on an analysis of 149 episodes of 63 scripted children's television shows from 2024 and 2025: 63 shows including 85 individual dads. The good news is that there were as many dads as moms on kids' TV shows. And roughly three-quarters of both mothers and fathers were shown doing at least one caregiving task. Fathers are not merely present; they are also shown parenting at the same rates as mothers. Fathers and mothers were shown as equally fun, equally strict, and equally warm, all to within a rounding error. On the other hand, dads were about three times more likely than moms to be the butt of the joke — 19% of the time versus 6%.

Forty years ago, the sociologist Ralph LaRossa made an important distinction between the culture of fatherhood and the actual conduct of fathers, and argued that there was an "asynchrony" between them. His claim was that while the sensitive "New Father" was all over the magazine racks, men's actual behaviour had barely changed. There are echoes of this criticism even today, but I think that, if anything, the problem has reversed. Fatherhood has been transformed; fathers today do roughly three times the childcare their own fathers did. The share of dads taking paid leave has doubled since just 2019. But the story we tell about dads is still lagging. The asynchrony between culture and conduct is still a problem, just the other way round now. Maybe real dads are now better than the "reel" dads on the screen.

RICHARD R. REEVES

President

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Executive summary

Beloved television dads have the power to deeply connect with audiences. But most caregivers on television are mothers,[1] and when fathers are shown, they are often portrayed as clueless, inept, and less capable than mothers.

Existing studies reveal three main findings about fathers on television. First, fatherhood is shown less than motherhood in television shows. Second, the "Doofus Dad" trope characterizes many TV fathers, while mothers are portrayed as the more competent parent. And third, fatherhood is less dimensional than motherhood. The cumulative effect of these portrayals is to normalize low expectations for fathers. Viewers are encouraged to see fathers' mistakes as a source of humor while implicitly accepting disengagement, incompetence, or limited caregiving as typical male behavior.

Media portrayals of fathers do more than reflect cultural attitudes — they help shape how audiences understand fathers' roles, responsibilities, and capabilities. Being funny is a tactful trait to make characters likeable, but when overdone, it risks undermining the importance of fathers' roles and offers an incomplete picture of fatherhood.

Therefore, this study examines the frequency and portrayal of fathers in children's television and compares these depictions with those of mothers. Specifically, it investigates differences in parenting styles, caregiving responsibilities, parental competence, occupations, and parent–child relationships

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to provide a comprehensive understanding of how mothers and fathers are portrayed on screen. We examined 149 episodes of scripted children's TV programs that aired from 2024–2025 and contained parents. Using quantitative and qualitative analyses, we draw these key findings:

KEY FINDINGS FROM QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS:

- **Moms and dads appeared at similar rates.** Overall, parent characters were 50.8% dads and 49.2% moms.
- **Dads were significantly more likely than moms to have an occupation.** In total, 87.0% of dads and 78.3% of moms had an occupation.
- **Moms were significantly more likely than dads to work in a HEAL profession but equally likely as dads to work in a STEM profession.** While moms were shown with a HEAL (healthcare, education, administration, literacy) occupation significantly more often than dads (21.7% compared with 13.0%), moms and dads were shown having a STEM occupation at similar rates (12.1% of moms, and 11.1% of dads).
- **Dads were three times more likely than moms to be shown as the butt of the joke.** Dads were shown being ridiculed, mocked, and laughed at about three times more often than moms. In total, 19.1% of dads and 5.7% of moms were shown as the butt of the joke.
- **Dads of color were more likely than white dads to be shown as strict.** In total, 7.7% of dads of color and 0.0% of white dads were depicted as strict. This finding reflects a well-documented media trope wherein dads of color are demanding, strict, and authoritative, while white dads are more lenient and hands-off.
- **Feminine-coded caregiving tasks dominated caregiving portrayals.** Feminine-coded tasks were about three times more likely than masculine-coded tasks to appear on screen (72.9% of all tasks were feminine-coded compared with 24.5% that were masculine-coded). But moms and dads were shown carrying out both sets of tasks at similar rates.
- **Moms and dads were equally shown performing caregiving tasks.** About 74% of moms and dads were shown doing at least one caregiving task. Caregiving tasks included personal care, health and medical support, household tasks, play, emotional support, and more.

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KEY FINDINGS FROM QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS:

- **Out of 85 unique dads in kids TV shows analyzed, nineteen were clear examples of the "Doofus Dad."** The Doofus Dad is easily manipulated, clumsy, lazy, clueless, or embarrassing but usually well-meaning and warm.
- **Caregiving failures were rare for moms and dads.** Moms and dads were rarely shown failing at caregiving tasks. But dads failed more frequently than moms.
- **Moms' caregiving efforts faded into the background, whereas dads' became a focal point.** When extraordinary acts of caregiving were shown, the outcome differed for moms and dads. For moms, caregiving efforts were more often interpreted as expectations and things mothers did naturally and without question. For dads, the same caregiving efforts were noticed and celebrated, and became an event that his children looked forward to.
- **Dads' failures were comedic, while moms' were subtle**. When dads failed at a caregiving task, it became a part of the narrative and was meant to make the viewer laugh. Contrarily, moms' failures were uncommon and not central to the narrative.
- **Dads were shown as incompetent with child supervision and household chores, but they excelled at teaching, play, providing, and emotional support tasks.** Dads were shown failing in caregiving tasks that involved supervision or household chores, like cooking and cleaning. But they shined in caregiving tasks that involved teaching moments, physical play, providing, and emotional support, which included verbal support and simply showing up for their child.



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Where are dads on TV?

Iconic TV fathers have a unique ability to forge deep bonds with viewers. *Full House*'s Danny Tanner, a widowed father who raised three daughters with warmth, patience, and a heartfelt lesson at the end of nearly every episode, became so cherished that audiences came to think of him as "America's dad." Philip Banks, or Uncle Phil, on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* offered a groundbreaking portrait of Black fatherhood, taking in his nephew and guiding him with a blend of authority and deep tenderness in scenes that remain among television's most affecting. More recently, Bandit Heeler, of the children's animated series *Bluey*, has been celebrated worldwide as a model of engaged, hands-on fatherhood, inspiring devoted online communities of dads who look to him as a role model. Such fathers resonate precisely because they show that men can be portrayed as nurturing, capable, and central to their children's lives.

Despite these cases, most caregivers on television are mothers,[2] and when fathers are shown, they are often portrayed as clueless, inept, and less capable than mothers. One study examined a sample of 68 television episodes from 34 of top-rated, family-centered sitcoms from 1980–2017; the unit of analysis for the study was each scene in which the father was shown as a direct participant or referenced in a humorous but disparaging way. The study revealed that in more recent sitcoms, fathers are shown

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in fewer parenting situations than mothers, and they are depicted more frequently as "humorously foolish" over the time span analyzed.[3] Another study of top scripted television shows from 2013–2020, conducted by the Geena Davis Institute, found that male caregivers are about twice as likely as female caregivers to be portrayed as incompetent and are often shown making mistakes in comical ways.[4] Other studies mirror this finding, illustrating that while most female caregivers on television are categorized as competent (93%), mature (93%), and not buffoons (93%), male caregivers are characterized in this way to a lesser extent (87% competent, 75% mature, 62% not buffoons).[5] Altogether, evidence points to fathers regularly being shown in the context of foolishness and comedy, particularly in television shows from the 2000s and 2010s.

But fathers aren't just shown as less capable than mothers, they're also shown doing different things. For example, the study carried out by the Geena Davis Institute found that male caregivers were more often shown grilling, painting, or fixing household items, whereas female caregivers were more often shown cooking and cleaning.[6] These portrayals can have long-lasting effects on children's ideas about who does what around the house based on gender. One monumental study that surveyed fourth and fifth graders found that children who watched more television were significantly more likely to say that only girls should do traditionally feminine chores around the house (e.g., cleaning, cooking) and that only boys should do traditionally masculine chores (e.g., taking out the garbage, helping with small repairs).[7]

These studies reveal three main findings about fathers on television. First, fatherhood is shown less than motherhood in television shows. Second, the "Doofus Dad" trope characterizes many fathers, while mothers are shown as the more competent parent. And third, fatherhood is less dimensional than motherhood. The cumulative effect of these portrayals is to normalize low expectations for fathers. Viewers are encouraged to see fathers' mistakes as a source of humor while implicitly accepting fathers' disengagement, incompetence, or limited caregiving as typical male behavior.



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Why we need a new vision of fatherhood on screen

Media portrayals of fathers do more than reflect cultural attitudes — they help shape how audiences understand fathers' roles, responsibilities, and capabilities. Being funny is a tactful trait to make characters likeable, but when overdone, it risks undermining the importance of fathers' roles and offers an incomplete picture of fatherhood.

Television is an important intervention tool that can help us understand societal views of fatherhood. Various surveys indicate that television exposure to specific genres are associated with both children's and adults' beliefs about important family behaviors, like conflict resolution and family support.[8] Among first-time expectant mothers, heavier television exposure and exposure to television programs that featured many fathers were each uniquely associated with the belief that fathers are not important for child development.[9] Among both first-time expectant mothers and fathers, thinking that TV portrayals are real is predictive of believing in traditionally gendered family roles and the belief that fathers are less important to children's development. Thus, portrayals of fatherhood can teach audiences about its expectations and norms.

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But why do portrayals of fatherhood in children's television matter? Some scholars argue that television families can influence children's understanding of family life as profoundly as their own home environments.[10] Because children's direct experiences with the broader world are limited, they rely on a range of socializing agents — including media — to learn about social norms, relationships, and expected behaviors.[11] As a result, on-screen portrayals of fathers can shape children's expectations of what fathers are like and the roles they should play in family life. These expectations may influence how children view fatherhood throughout development. Yet, despite their potential influence, portrayals of fatherhood in children's television remain understudied.

In sum, the present study examines the frequency and portrayal of fathers in children's television, and compares these depictions with those of mothers. Specifically, it investigates differences in parenting styles, caregiving responsibilities, parental competence, occupations, and parent–child relationships to provide a comprehensive understanding of how mothers and fathers are portrayed on screen.



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Description of sample and methodology

Sample

In total, 149 episodes containing parental portrayals were analyzed.

Our sample was constructed in multiple steps. First, we identified all scripted, U.S.-produced, English-language children's television shows in production for 2025 and 2024, according to the Luminate (by *Variety*) trade database. This included broadcast and cable shows from the 2024–2025 season (n = 35) and the 2023–2024 season (n = 48), as well as streaming shows from 2025 (n = 78) and 2024 (n = 90). This resulted in a final sample of 251 shows (138 from 2024 and 113 from 2025).

The second step was to identify the relevant shows: those with parents. For each of the 251 shows, we carried out background research to identify which had at least one parental figure among recurring characters in the series.[12] Our background research of these 251 shows revealed 63 shows (25.1%) had at least one parental figure as recurring cast members.

The third step was to sample episodes from these shows for analysis. Episodes were sampled at the level of the season rather than the show: For each season that a show aired during the study window (the 2024 and 2025 seasons), we selected the second and the penultimate episode for analysis. Because a few shows aired more than one season during a year analyzed, these shows were sampled once per

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season and therefore contributed more than two episodes to the overall sample per year. Sampling at the season level was intentional, allowing the analysis to capture parental portrayals across a specific season.

Each selected episode was analyzed for parental portrayals. When a narrative parent did not appear in the second or penultimate episode of a given season, we then sampled the first episode and the final episode for a parental portrayal. In a small number of series/seasons, this procedure yielded only a single episode containing a narrative parent; we retained these cases rather than force a second observation. In total, we analyzed 149 episodes containing parental portrayals from the 63 shows.

Methodology

To understand themes and patterns of fathers in children's television, we carried out a content analysis of the identified episodes with parents. Content analysis is a systematic method for quantifying themes and patterns across programs.

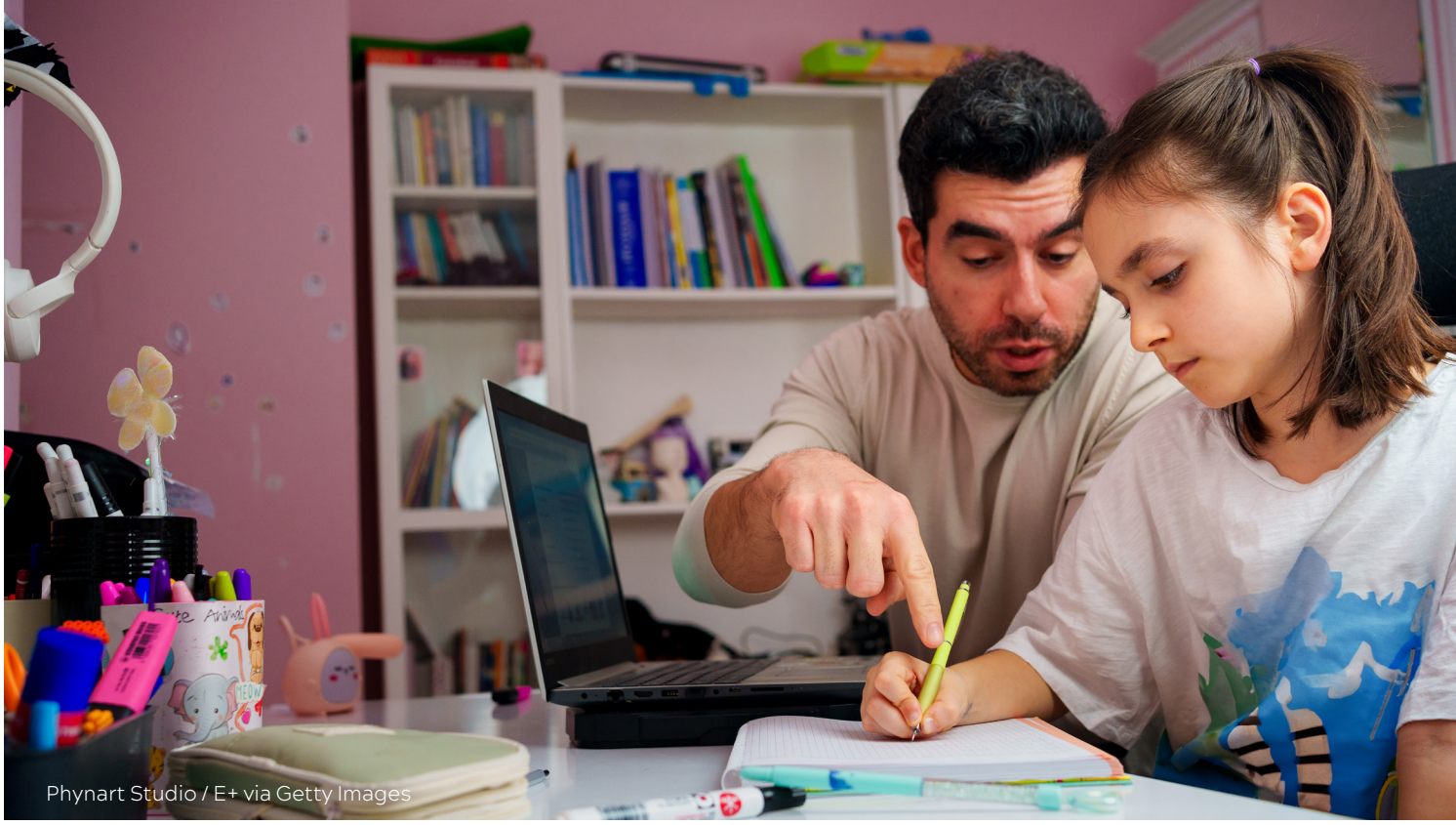
Our analysis followed a structured, two-step process. First, after a training period where acceptable levels of interrater reliability were reached, the expert analysts watched the episodes to identify the presence or absence of key variables (e.g., whether the parent is warm, the butt of the joke, the Doofus Dad, funny, fun, strict, their occupation [HEAL, STEM], if they carry out a caregiving task, and gendered nature and competence level of the task).

Expert researchers reexamined key scenes of caregiving task moments to capture contextual cues, indicators of competence, and the narrative framing of each task. This additional layer of analysis provided richer insight into how caregiving is portrayed on screen.

We asked the following research questions:

- Who are the fathers shown in children's TV?
- What character traits are associated with fathers and mothers?
- How involved are fathers with their children?
- Who excels and/or fails in which domestic domains?

For quantitative analysis, we examine the co-occurrence between two or more variables using chi-square tests. To compare frequencies of two variables, we used Z-tests.



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Findings

Quantitative insights

WHO ARE THE FATHERS SHOWN IN CHILDREN'S TV?

The dataset included 319 "parent observations," reflecting instances of parents of children 18 years old and younger who contributed to the episode narrative in supporting, notable supporting, co-lead, or leading roles. Across the episodes reviewed, mothers and fathers were shown in equal share. Fathers made up 50.8% of all parent observations, whereas mothers were 49.2%. No nonbinary parents were identified.

Because multiple episodes were sampled from some shows, the same parent character sometimes appeared more than once in the dataset. After accounting for these repeated appearances, the dataset contained 166 unique parent characters (85 dads, 81 moms).

TABLE 1

Share of parents in children's television, by gender

	Overall	2024	2025
Fathers (*n* = 162)	50.8%	48.4%	54.1%
Mothers (*n* = 157)	49.2%	51.6%	45.9%

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While most parents on children's shows were under age 50, intersectional analysis indicated that fathers were significantly more likely than mothers to be 50-plus (6.2% compared with 1.3%). But fathers and mothers were similarly likely to be people of color, disabled, LGBTQIA+, and fat. Just one dad had a disability (Nolan in *Max & the Midknights*); no moms were disabled.

TABLE 2

Intersectional analysis of parents in children's television

	Fathers	Mothers
People of color	52.8%	59.1%
Age 50-plus	6.2%*	1.3%*
Disabled	1.2%	0.0%
LGBTQIA+	1.9%	1.3%
Fat	5.6%	4.5%

Note. Asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference.

Next, we assessed if fathers and mothers in children's TV had occupations and if there were differences in the kinds of occupations they had. Below, we unpack the following main findings:

- Fathers are significantly more likely than mothers to have an occupation.
- Mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to have a HEAL occupation.
- Fathers and mothers were portrayed in STEM occupations at similar rates.

While the majority of both mothers and fathers in these children's shows had occupations, fathers were shown with an occupation significantly more than mothers (87.0% of fathers and 78.3% of mothers had an occupation). But much like families in the U.S., most families on screen were dual-income households, where both parents had an occupation.

We also examined whether parents were portrayed in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) occupations or HEAL (healthcare, education, administration, and literacy) occupations. Together, these categories capture the broad divide between technical and care-oriented careers. While some professions span both domains (for example, physicians and dentists), these categories provide a useful framework for understanding gender segregation of occupations. Occupational gender gaps exist in both in the U.S. — women are underrepresented in STEM fields, while men are underrepresented in HEAL fields.[13]

Among the parents in the sample, mothers were significantly more likely than fathers to be shown in HEAL professions (21.7% of mothers compared with 13.0% of fathers). Fathers and mothers were portrayed in STEM occupations at similar rates (11.1% of fathers and 12.1% of mothers), suggesting that children's television presents mothers and fathers as equally likely to work in STEM fields, even as mothers remain more likely than fathers to be depicted in traditionally care-oriented professions.

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TABLE 3

Share of fathers and mothers with an occupation and type of occupation

	Percent of fathers	Percent of mothers
Has occupation (*n* = 264)	87.0%*	78.3%*
Has STEM occupation (*n* = 37)	11.1%	12.1%
Has HEAL occupation (*n* = 55)	13.0%*	21.7%*

Note. Asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference. Occupations that were not included in STEM or HEAL included blue-collar jobs, occupations in business, the service industry, or agriculture, among others. Parents' occupations were determined based on background information if the narrative of the episode did not disclose their occupation.

WHAT CHARACTER TRAITS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH FATHERS AND MOTHERS?

Next, our analysts looked for the presence of several character traits, and whether the parents on screen were shown in possession of them. Each observation of a parent character was assessed for the presence of the following traits:

- Funny (fathers and mothers were equally shown as funny)
- Fun (fathers and mothers were equally shown as fun)
- Strict (fathers and mothers were equally shown as strict)
- Warm (fathers and mothers were equally shown as warm)
- Butt of the joke (fathers were significantly more likely than mothers to be the butt of the joke)

While fathers and mothers were portrayed similarly regarding most traits, fathers were significantly more likely to be portrayed as the butt of the joke (19.1% compared with 5.7% for mothers). Various examples include fathers getting physically hurt as comedic relief: Fathers were shown getting electrocuted, slipping on ice, falling from the sky, pushed off a cliff, tripping, and more. In several episodes, children took advantage of their clueless fathers. In one episode, the children lied to their father about their bedtime without the father realizing it. In another episode, children distracted their father so they could get away with bad behavior. In a third episode, children concealed a neighbor child's injury, leaving the father completely unaware of what had happened until later.

Another way that dads were the butt of the joke was in their ineffectiveness. Examples include dads who were confident in themselves as caregivers but whose family failed to take them seriously; a dad who asserted himself but whose family ignored him time and time again; and another dad who tried to come across as confident but who was later shown starting to cry when his wife interrogated him. Across these examples, the comedy relied on fathers being portrayed as easily deceived, distracted, oblivious to situations unfolding around them, or just straight-up inadequate.

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Most parents in kids TV shows were shown as "warm," but mothers were depicted this way slightly more often (64.3% compared with 58.0% for fathers), and fathers were more often shown as funny (17.3% compared with 11.5% for mothers), but those differences were not statistically significant. Overall, mothers and fathers were similarly shown as strict (4.9% of dads, 6.4% of moms) and fun (28.4% of dads, 25.5% of moms), suggesting that children's television avoids strongly reinforcing traditional stereotypes that position fathers as the "fun parent" and mothers as the disciplinarian.

TABLE 4

Fathers and mothers shown with stereotypical traits

	Fathers	Mothers	Difference
Funny	17.3%	11.5%	+5.8%
Fun	28.4%	25.5%	+2.9%
Strict	4.9%	6.4%	-1.5%
Warm	58.0%	64.3%	-6.3%
Butt of the joke	19.1%*	5.7%*	+13.4%

Note. Asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference.

When looking at racial differences amongst fathers and stereotypical traits, one finding stood out: Fathers of color are shown as strict more than white fathers.

While depictions of strict fathers were uncommon overall, fathers of color were significantly more likely than white fathers to be shown as strict (7.7% compared with 0.0%). For example, in one episode, a Black father was strict toward his daughter when she said she wanted to start playing softball. Rather than it being a hobby or an activity to do simply for fun, the father pushed the daughter to practice, run, train, and commit to her team to the point that the daughter got overexerted and overwhelmed. The father was also shown disciplining his daughter when she was involved in a cheating incident at school. In a different episode, a Latino father was shown punishing his children, described as being a stickler for rules, and as the strict and tough parent in comparison with his wife.

There were no statistically significant differences between white fathers and fathers of color on the remaining traits (funny, fun, warm, and the butt of the joke). That said, fathers of color were also more often shown as warm compared with white fathers (63.1% compared with 56.9%), suggesting that fathers of color were not depicted solely as disciplinarians.

White fathers were more likely than fathers of color to be shown as the butt of the joke (24.1% compared with 18.5%), but this difference was also not statistically significant.

A small number of fathers were nonhuman and therefore nonracialized (e.g., animal characters like sharks, dogs, dinosaurs, tigers, owls, unicorns, etc.), which are shown in Table 5. These nonhuman fathers were far less often to be the butt of the joke (just 10.3% compared with 24.1% of white fathers and 18.5% of fathers of color).

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TABLE 5

Fathers shown with stereotypical traits, by race

	White fathers (*n* = 58)	Fathers of color (*n* = 65)	Difference between white fathers and fathers of color	Nonracialized fathers (*n* = 39)
Funny	17.2%	16.9%	+0.3%	17.9%
Fun	31.0%	27.7%	+3.3%	25.6%
Strict	0.0%*	7.7%*	-7.7%	7.7%
Warm	56.9%	63.1%	-6.2%	51.3%
Butt of the joke	24.1%	18.5%	+4.0%	10.3%

Note. Asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference. Percentages are the share of distinct dad instances flagged "butt of joke" (each counted once, regardless of episode count).

DEPICTIONS OF PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT

Next, we analyzed the frequency at which mothers and fathers were shown doing caregiving tasks. Caregiving tasks were defined as things a parent did for a dependent, typically because a dependent couldn't fully care for themselves or because it was their role as a parent (e.g., enrichment or affection). Tasks could include personal care, health and medical support, household tasks (like cooking and cleaning), emotional and social support, play, administrative and coordination tasks, and supervision or safety. Altogether, parent characters carried out a total of 618 tasks across all episodes in the sample.

About 74% of dads and moms were shown doing at least one caregiving task, which means that, at this basic level, children's television portrayed dads as just as likely as moms to take part in caregiving. This is a counter-stereotypical and encouraging finding.

TABLE 6

Share of fathers and mothers shown doing a caregiving task

	Percent of fathers	Percent of mothers
Shown doing at least one caregiving tasks	74.1%	74.5%

Which parents did what tasks? We categorized the types of caregiving tasks carried out by parents as "feminine-coded tasks" and "masculine-coded tasks." Feminine-coded tasks were defined as caregiving tasks that have historically been characterized as "women's work," such as kitchen management, physical touch/affection, grooming, cleaning, bedtime routines, extracurricular enrichment activities (creative activities with the child), pickup/chauffeuring short distances, gift giving, and hosting. Masculine-coded tasks were defined as caregiving tasks such as schoolwork help (especially math or science), economic provision, physical play, car maintenance, driving long distances, disciplining, protection, home renovations and repairs, lawn care, and grilling.

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We found feminine-coded tasks on screen to be significantly more common than masculine-coded tasks (72.9% of all tasks were judged to be feminine-coded; 24.5% were judged to be masculine-coded, while 2.6% were judged to be gender neutral).[14] However, fathers and mothers were similarly shown performing feminine-coded and masculine-coded caregiving tasks. As shown in the table below, about one-quarter of the tasks fathers and mothers were shown carrying out were masculine-coded (26.2% of fathers' tasks compared with 24.0% of mothers' tasks), while about three-quarters of the tasks fathers and mothers were shown carrying out were feminine-coded (73.8% of fathers' tasks compared with 76.0% of mothers' tasks).

On-screen portrayals of caregiving tasks suggest that feminine-coded tasks dominate the types of tasks that are shown in children's TV, regardless of *who* is shown doing them. When children see caregiving on screen, they are mostly exposed to an emphasis on nurture, domesticity, and relational tasks. In other words, the caregiving gap on screen is not necessarily *what* mothers and fathers are shown doing but between *the type* of tasks that are shown.

TABLE 7

Gendered task distribution, by parent gender

Parent	Masculine-coded tasks	Feminine-coded tasks
Fathers	26.2% (*n* = 81)	73.8% (*n* = 228)
Mothers	24.0% (*n* = 71)	76.0% (*n* = 225)

Note. Share of tasks judged to be gender neutral (*n* = 16) are excluded from the table.

Qualitative insights

For qualitative insights, research analysts rewatched every episode where at least one caregiving task was shown. We gathered more insights and contextual cues from each task and episode to further assess where fathers failed and where they excelled in caregiving tasks.

Across 149 episodes of kids' television, moms and dads were shown doing caregiving work at similar rates and across similar kinds of tasks. What differed was not how much each parent did, but how well it was done and how the show treated the outcome. Our qualitative assessment found that competence and failure were narrated on two different registers depending on which parent was on screen. Most of the tasks carried out on screen were done competently, but at the extremes — excelling and failing — mothers and fathers were judged by different rules.

This section lays out those patterns and gives concrete examples of what excelling and failing actually looked like for mothers and fathers on screen.

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In the episodes analyzed, four things proved consistently true, regardless of what the task itself was:

- When moms excelled at common tasks, it tended to disappear into the background. She picked the kids up, got dinner on the table, handled the bedtime routine with love and affection — and the show simply moved on. There was little fanfare around it. In short, these efforts read as simply what a mother does, not as something she accomplished.
- When dads excelled at common tasks, it tended to become an event. The same ordinary tasks — cooking, tucking a kid in, showing up to a school event — reliably drew a reaction, such as a joke, a beat of surprise or applause, or another character noticing it out loud.
- Failure was rare for both parents — but when a mom failed, it was written as a subtle slip. She misjudged a situation or was stretched too thin, and the moment was quick. It was rarely staged for a laugh but was instead a quick line of dialogue, then the story moved on.
- For a dad, failure was much more common but was often indistinguishable from comedy, and it was usually a more integral part of the storyline. When dads fell short — of a rescue, a lesson, a simple errand — it was staged as a bit, where the purpose was for the audience to laugh at the dad. The earnestness of the attempt was what made the stumble funny, and it was often a driving force for what happened next in the story.

Together, these four patterns form a simple "credit gap" grid, with the same caregiving behavior earning a different narrative response depending on which parent performs it. In the episodes reviewed, dads were credited for competence, while their failures were typically played for laughs. Moms, meanwhile, received less credit for their competency, and their (rare) failures were treated as minor plot points.

FIGURE 1

The Parenting "Credit Gap" in Kids TV

Caregiving Behavior	Mom's Narratives	Dad's Narratives
Competent	**Invisible** Quiet, even when done well. The most common outcome for a mom's ordinary caregiving is no narrative comment at all. Common tasks include grocery shopping with a checklist, making a standard dinner, doing laundry, grooming before bedtime, checking in with kids, and providing emotional comfort.	**Celebrated** Noticed, even when ordinary. Routine parenting for a dad draws comedic or elevated framing. Common tasks include imaginative play, physical play, cooking and cleaning as performative, interactive teaching, and playful bedtime routines.
Incompetent	**Failure, but rare** Rare and minor. When a mom falls short, it reads as a subtle slip, less often as comedy. Examples include misjudgments or tardiness.	**Funny** Rare but almost always funny and a central part of the plot. A dad's failure and comedy are nearly the same category — effort is earnest, but the execution is often played for humor. A dad's failures drive the story. Examples include making a mess or being clumsy while doing a caregiving task.

Note. Analysis is based on qualitative assessment of the TV shows (streaming, broadcast, and cable) made for children in 2024 and 2025, according to Luminate (by *Variety*).

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THE ZONES OF COMPETENCE FOR MOMS AND DADS

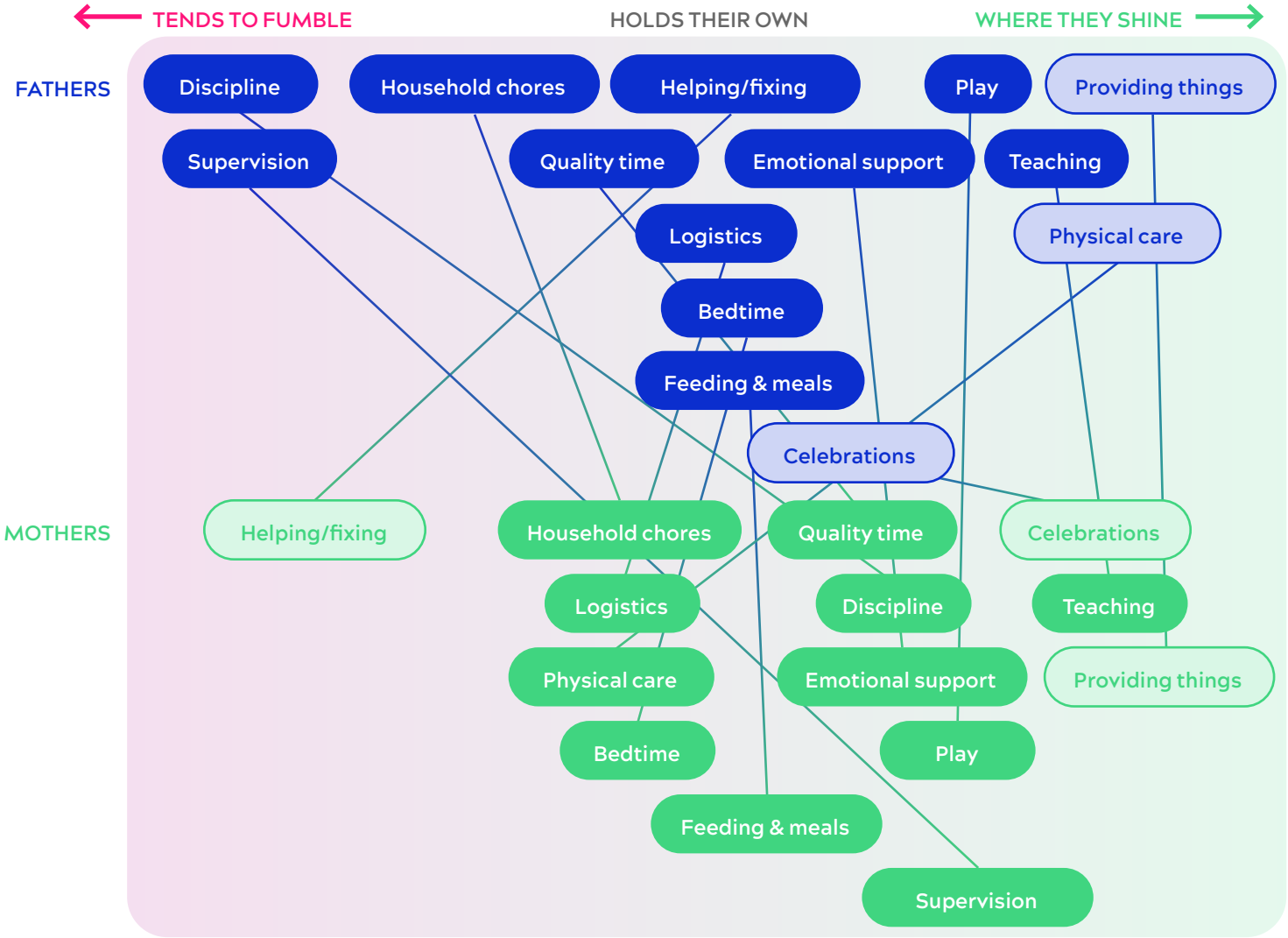
Although it was rare for both mothers and fathers in our sample, fathers were shown failing at a caregiving task roughly four to five times as often as mothers.

In the episodes reviewed, that failure gap played out as two distinct authority domains. Fathers were written as specialists. They were genuinely excellent in a handful of zones (teaching, play, providing things) and visibly error-prone in others (supervision, discipline, and many household chores). Mothers were written as generalists. Their competence was flat and dependable across nearly every zone.

The chart below captures this visually: Fathers scatter from one edge to the other, while mothers cluster in a reliable center-right band, with almost nothing pinned to the "fumble" side.

FIGURE 2

Zones of Competence – How TV Parents Appear in Kids TV



Note. Tasks in lighter shades had fewer occurrences on screen, and therefore are less robust. Tasks to the left are those parents tend to fumble or struggle with. Tasks to the right are tasks where parents are more often shown excelling. Analysis is based on qualitative assessment of the TV shows (streaming, broadcast, and cable) made for children in 2024 and 2025, according to Luminate (by *Variety*).

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FATHERLY FUMBLES: SUPERVISION, DISCIPLINE, HOUSEHOLD CHORES

If there's one zone that separates how moms and dads were written, it's keeping kids safe and supervised. It's the steepest connecting line on the chart: For the same task type, dads sit near the "fumble" edge, while moms are near the "shine" edge.

Fathers failed at supervision in roughly a quarter of the acts reviewed. The failures tended to be competence-undercut-by-chaos: a dad who took a rescue seriously (supervision/protection zone) but bungled the execution, or approved something and lost control of it. In one portrayal, a dad gave his daughter permission to collect pumpkins, but the pumpkin collection got out of hand and was impossible to manage. Eventually, mom stepped in to help resolve the overcollection of pumpkins. In two other episodes, dads failed at supervising sleepovers, with kids sneaking out of the house or disobeying the dads. Mothers, in the same zone, were written as capable. Over half their supervision acts were exceptional, and almost no mothers failed. In one episode, a mother sacrificed herself so her children could be saved. Another mom fought intense monsters side by side with her kids despite having no powers, and she went "above and beyond" to find them when they were in danger. In this "supervision/protection" zone, moms shine.

Beyond supervision, two more zones cluster on dad's fumble side: discipline and the domestic sphere.

In the sample, fathers failed at roughly a quarter of discipline acts (compared to mothers who nearly never failed). The recurring image was a father who couldn't get his kids to listen or obey him. In one episode, a dad tried but failed to discipline his children, and in another scene, he couldn't keep the kids under control and ended up ruining Thanksgiving dinner. In another example, a dad came up with a detailed plan for a roadtrip, with strict times on when to leave and what roads to take. In the end, the family never left because they chose not to listen to their dad.

Although uncommon, dads were shown failing in the "domestic" zone more often than moms, and the father's failures in this zone were usually played for slapstick. For example, when doing dishes, one dad dropped an entire stack of pans he was putting away and made a mess. Another dad failed to clean up a sink of dirty dishes, while another failed at grocery shopping for Thanksgiving. And a different dad was shown making a disgusting soup.

The throughline across all three of these failure zones for dads was that fathers were most often written as failing precisely at the everyday but also authority-requiring tasks that mothers were quietly trusted to handle.

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FATHERLY SIGNATURE STRENGTHS: TEACHING, PLAY, PROVIDING THINGS, EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Where fathers were allowed to shine, they shined brightly. When it came to the "teaching" zone, dads stood out. This was where fathers got to be wise and creative. For example, one dad taught his daughter about Shabbat in an innovative and creative way. Another dad invented a song to teach his son that trying new things paid off.

"Play" was another zone where dads shined. Fathers were frequently the fun, all-in playmate. Dads weren't afraid to get into character or let out their inner child in the hopes of making their child have a fun time. For instance, one dad was shown putting his children to bed and told them he would read them a bedtime story. His children told him that they wanted him to make the story funny. The dad listened and made funny voices and gestures when reading the story out loud. Another dad visited his daughter at school and played with puppets with her and her friends, chasing the children around with the puppets as he got into character.

Lastly, the zone of "emotional support" rounds out the picture of where dads excelled in the episodes reviewed. Fathers were written as warm and emotionally present at rates matching mothers. In these examples, dads were emotionally supportive with their presence (cheering on their children) or lending a listening ear when children needed to talk. In one show, a dad attended every softball game where his daughter played. He made sure to sit in the front row and cheer her on when she was playing. In other cases, dads cheered on their children in all sorts of scenarios — from riding a rollercoaster to graduation. And finally, many dads showed their verbal emotional support, too, by telling their children that they were proud of them or asking them how they were feeling when they suspected something was wrong.

MOTHERS AS THE RELIABLE DEFAULT

In the episodes reviewed, the mother pattern was almost the inverse of the father pattern: not a set of peaks and valleys but a steady plateau. In most zones, mothers were judged to be competent at very high rates, with essentially zero failures. The zones of "domestic/chores," "logistical management," "bedtime," "physical care," and "cooking/feeding" were all handled without visible error. The only two zones where mothers showed any stumble at all were thin-data categories. In one example, a mom showed up late to a parent–teacher conference and appeared frazzled but mostly unbothered by it (she didn't apologize, for instance). In another failure, a mother was picking her daughter's dress for a school dance and not registering the daughter's dislike (and embarrassment) about the selection. Mom's "weaknesses," in other words, were shown as gentle and few.

The data suggests that children's shows rarely let a mother look incompetent.

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WHO IS THE DOOFUS DAD?

Next, we looked at the dads whom the shows presented as a "doofus." The "Doofus Dad" is a character-level archetype where the defining personality traits include foolishness and incompetence. While the butt of the joke can occur within one single portrayal, the Doofus Dad encompasses a whole persona to a father and is interwoven into a core part of that character.

In total, we identified 19 dads who embodied the "Doofus Dad" trope. As expected, the Doofus Dad was significantly associated with being the butt of the joke, but his portrayal is worth an in-depth look.

The "Doofus Dad" varied from show to show, but common themes emerged:

1. **Easily deceived or outsmarted.** Dads were often tricked, distracted, or manipulated by children without even realizing it. Children exploited their father's gullibility to get away with bad behavior. For instance, one group of children were shown trying to sneak out while their mom was working and their dad was looking after them; they distracted their dad with a silly excuse to make him preoccupied with something else while they left. Another dad was seen playing a game with his daughter and ended up with his legs getting tied up. While he was preoccupied with that, his son was seen eating muffins that were reserved for family dinner.

2. **Physically clumsy or accident-prone**. Dads' incompetence was often comedic and expressed through their bodies with tripping, falling, hurting themselves, or causing accidental destruction. For instance, one dad tripped while he was chasing after his son and fell into a bowl of mashed potatoes. Another dad was constantly depicted as clumsy. His clumsiness often caused him to hurt himself.

3. **Lazy or oblivious.** Dads often avoided responsibility, ignored problems when help was needed, or were fully unaware that danger was near. For example, one dad was shown laying down on the couch when mom came home with her hands full of groceries. Instead of helping her, he remained in the same position to show that he was oblivious to his wife's needs. In another episode, an entire family was afraid of contracting a disease, but the father was oblivious and shown unwinding throughout the entire episode.

4. **Clueless, but well-meaning**. Dads were often genuinely loving and caring but were also incompetent. They tried their hardest to be a good parent, but they fell short. These portrayals were unique in that they were not depicted in one single act or scene. Rather, the character came across in this way throughout the entire series. One dad was portrayed as very childlike and clueless but also enthusiastic and present with his children.

5. **Embarrassing or socially inappropriate**. Dads' behavior was often embarrassing. They made bad jokes or said the wrong thing at the wrong time. For example, one family recognized that their dad was prone to accidents and embarrassment, so they kept him away from important situations. Another dad said silly jokes throughout an episode, and his wife called him out as foolish. One show dedicated an entire episode to making fun of "dad jokes," likening them to a zombie-inducing disease.



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Recommendations

Altogether, the sheer presence of dad characters in kids' TV is encouraging — and so is how involved they are once they're there. Dads performed caregiving tasks at the same rate as moms, and did it well, turning routine tasks into playful, interactive moments that other characters responded to warmly.

However, dads were often the punchline. They were mocked and many were reduced to the "Doofus Dad" trope. When they failed at a caregiving task, it was almost always played for laughs and drove the story forward. Moms' failures, by contrast, were treated as subtle slips, incidental to the narrative.

These findings lead us to the following recommendations to improve the representation of fatherhood on TV for children.

Resist the lazy laugh. In the episodes reviewed, dads were significantly more likely than moms to be the butt of the joke, and the "Doofus Dad" trope was prevalent. Common ways that these portrayals came to life were by showing dads get physically hurt, being tricked or clueless, or by their family failing to take them seriously. When children are consistently exposed to these types of portrayals, they absorb a subtle but steady message: Fathers are not to be taken seriously. Rethink humor and how it relates to dads on screen. Humor is a beloved element of children's television shows, but it should generally avoid relying on dad incompetence for laughs. Broaden how dads get to be funny. Wit, self-aware humor, and situational comedy can all land a laugh without leaning on his failure.

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Broaden the range of caregiving tasks shown on screen. Feminine-coded caregiving tasks dominated the portrayals reviewed, and they're absolutely worth continuing to highlight. But when masculine-coded caregiving is largely absent, children's understanding of what care looks like narrows. The goal isn't to swap one for the other, but to widen the lens: Showing more characters (regardless of gender) fixing things, handling finances, or engaging in physical forms of play alongside cooking, comforting, and nurturing. The more forms of care kids see modeled, the more they'll learn to place equal value on all of them.

Challenge the occupation defaults for moms and dads. In the episodes reviewed, dads were significantly more likely than moms to have an occupation, but moms were significantly more likely than dads to have HEAL occupations. These portrayals reinforce longstanding gendered stereotypes that have to do with work — women naturally belong in nurturing, service-oriented work, while men naturally belong in the workplace (more than women). Write more dads who are not defined by their jobs, and diversify the types of jobs moms are shown in. These small shifts can go a long way toward loosening the gendered scripts children absorb about work and parenthood.

Use parenting failures strategically. Parenting failures were rare in these episodes, and they were even more rare for moms. But when dads failed, it was often comedic. We recommend writing parenting failures that are human and revocable instead of failures that define a parent as incompetent or a "doofus." Such portrayals can communicate the message that competence can coexist with imperfection. Ways to do this include showing a solution to the failure or showing characters fail with dignity; ensure that the failure is spread evenly among moms and dads.

Hold moms and dads to the same caregiving standards. In the episodes reviewed, dads were more often rewarded for the minimum in terms of the caregiving task they carried out, but mothers were held to a higher standard. Such portrayals can communicate the idea that any caregiving act is exceptional for a father but not for a mother. One way to work against this notion is by having characters react the same way for caregiving tasks performed by both moms and dads.

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Acknowledgments

This research is supported by Rise Together, a donor-advised fund sponsored and administered by National Philanthropic Trust and established by Richard Reeves, founding president of the American Institute for Boys and Men. The authors also thank Dr. Tegan Bratcher, Sofie Christensen, Cameron Espinoza, Dr. Gina Gayle, Dr. Sophia Noor Kiser, Dr. Alexis Romero Walker, Dr. Sarah Trinh, and Jenna Virgo for their assistance with data collection, and Romeo Pérez for assistance with data management and data collection. Getty Images kindly provided the images featured.

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HOW TO CITE THIS STUDY

Terán, L., and Conroy, M. (2026). Present but punchlines: Fathers in children's television. Geena Davis Institute.