



Culture

The Changing Roles Of TV Dads

Jenna Goudreau, 06.15.10, 8:00 PM ET

As Father's Day approaches, it's a good time to step back and ponder the evolution of the patres familias on television. Our starting point is, of course, Jim Anderson (*Father Knows Best*) and Ward Cleaver (*Leave It To Beaver*). We end with the many dads featured in this season's breakouts, ABC's *Modern Family* and NBC's primetime drama *Parenthood*.

TV fatherhood has traveled a circuitous path to reach this point. The earliest portrayals of dads were mostly simplistic and idealized, closely sticking to the script of what an ideal dad *should* be. The 1970s and '80s gave way to new family shows that mirrored our shifting society. Suddenly blended families, dual-income parents and work-from-home dads graced our screens.

As feminism built, moms began overshadowing TV dads, who played the part of the well-meaning idiot. Now, in this era of anything-goes-TV, primetime lineups offer a range of dads and family set-ups that, arguably, more accurately reflect modern fathers: breadwinners, nurturers, sages, bumbler and, most importantly, real guys who want to be great fathers but don't always know what they're doing.

In Photos: Modern TV Dads

TV Dads: From Father Knows Best To Father Knows Nothing

TV dads of the 1950s and early '60s were the fathers we hoped for with the family lives we dreamed of. Dad worked a boring but steady 9-to-5 while mom was at home to manage the kids in a middle-class suburban bubble. Iconic Jim Anderson from *Father Knows Best* returned from his insurance job every evening, removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves to solve the problems of the family--crises that ranged from prom dates to homework to burnt pot roast.

"In early depictions of the father, particularly on *Leave It To Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, dads are these guiding and almost godlike figures in the family," says pop culture expert Al Martin. "The classic archetype of a 1950s dad was to bring home the bacon, get involved in the children's lives and be the wise disciplinarian."

Family life was simple, often spent around the dinner table talking about the day's events. Dad was the patriarch and moral compass of the family. *Leave It To Beaver's* Ward Cleaver ended every show with wise words and a life lesson for his sons. And Cleaver, unlike his on-screen successors with smart-aleck kids, always had the last word.

"We really began to see the splintered dad in the late 1960s and the 1970s," says Dwight DeWerth-Pallmeyer, director of communication studies at Widener University in Pennsylvania. After the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal, American idealism was breaking down and so were our father figures. Archie Bunker of *All In The Family*, as an example, was flawed and harbored bitter prejudices, which reflected a "very different image of the father and a greater societal disenchantment," says DeWerth-Pallmeyer.

Changes in broader society and family dynamics were increasingly showcased on camera in the next few decades. *Brady Bunch* dad Mike Brady was one of TV's first stepfathers, and his blended family of six kids was a far cry from mom, dad, 2.5 kids and a dog (although they did have a dog, Tiger, for two seasons). TV parents Elyse and Steven Keaton from *Family Ties* both worked full-time, as did Heathcliff and Clair Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*. Suddenly dad was no longer the sole provider.

"Roles of dads started to shift with the rise of first and second wave feminism," says Martin. "We began seeing women working outside of the home and as strong female heads of household."

The Cosby Show offered an updated version of *Father Knows Best*. The Huxtables shared economic and parenting responsibilities, while the character co-created and played by Bill Cosby maintained the role of the wise and loving father. Yet, he wasn't perfect. And unlike previous television moms, Clair was strong, independent and an equal counterweight on the show.

The late '80s and into the '90s featured the rise of the idiot dad. Martin says that in an attempt to counteract and ridicule authority and patriarchy, TV moms became overly strong and TV dads turned into buffoons. *The Simpsons* started a wave of deplorable,

idiot dads (looking at you, *Family Guy*) who need more mothering by their wives than their kids. Homer Simpson (Doh!) was more often seen drinking, belching and tripping up rather than doing any real parenting. Likewise, Al Bundy on *Married With Children* was another anti-dad who would rather be anywhere else than with his family.

"It used to be that father knew best, and then we started to wonder if he knew anything at all," says Matt Roush, senior television critic at *TV Guide Magazine*. "Dads became bumbling fools and the butts of jokes."

Roush describes the family on *Everybody Loves Raymond* as "suffering" the dad character, Ray Barone. The mom, Debra, is the one who keeps the family together. "She thinks he's an idiot and tells him so," Roush says. "Dads used to rule the roost, but now they come home and are like, 'Oh God, what have I come home to?'"

But after moving from wise dads to clueless dads, today's TV fathers are beginning to find a balance. "With cutting edge shows and reality television, we're starting to get a more realistic view of fatherhood," says celebrity dad of three Dean McDermott, who stars in Oxygen network's reality show *Tori and Dean: Home Sweet Hollywood* with his wife, Tori Spelling.

McDermott recently hosted a TV Guide Network special called *Modern TV Dads*, which examined the latest crop of television fathers. He points to shows like ABC's *Modern Family* as more accurately representing the range of family structures acceptable today. The show breaks ground by portraying a same-sex couple that struggles through adoption and fatherhood and an older father with a start-over family.

While past shows delved into dual-earning parenthood, modern series are portraying moms as sole breadwinners. "With more women in the workforce, dads are also stepping up to the plate to be stay-at-home dads and the main parent," McDermott says.

Parenthood, NBC's new primetime drama, features couple Joel and Julia, where Joel is a nurturing stay-at-home dad and Julia is a high-powered lawyer. The show also follows several different types of paternal characters--a grandfather, a breadwinner and an accidental dad--and all are portrayed as capable, loving fathers who may not know what they're doing but are trying their best.

"We're getting a real insight into dads now," says McDermott. "Parenthood doesn't come with a manual, and we're seeing dads make mistakes and in different situations. It's about time. It takes the pressure off us."

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