



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 6 to 8
About the Author: MediaSmarts

TV Dads: Immature and Irresponsible?

Overview

In this lesson, students explore the nature of stereotypes by looking at the negative image of the TV dad as presented in situation comedies (sitcoms) and advertisements. Students start with an opportunity to share their prior knowledge through a two-part “word splash” on the topic of TV fathers. Then they apply their knowledge to a guided classroom discussion on gender stereotypes, and review a backgrounder on TV dads.

Next, students look at an ad that attracted complaints from fatherhood rights interest groups. Finally, working in groups, students share their scenarios from their word splash and choose one to perform in the suggested activity called From Sitcom to Sit-Real. There is an optional follow-up activity in which students track TV portrayals of fathers through a TV Dads Log. Teachers may wish to exercise caution and show sensitivity in the discussions of gender portrayal and representation of fathers in the media, depending on students’ family dynamics.

Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- an understanding of what a gender stereotype is
- an awareness that stereotypes exist in the portrayal of dads in TV sitcoms and ads
- an awareness of how young people may be influenced by gender messages
- an understanding that ads and sitcoms do not necessarily represent reality
- an understanding that, as informed and empowered people, they can use their own skills and tools to bring about positive change

Preparation and Materials

- To prepare for this lesson, read the *TV Dads: Backgrounder for Teachers*.
- Photocopy the student handouts *TV Dads Word Splash* and *TV Dads* and the optional follow-up item *TV Dads Log*.
- You can choose to use the *TV Dads: Immature and Irresponsible? student module* as an alternative to the handouts.
- Also, you may wish to collect your own examples of the way fathers are portrayed in ads and TV shows.



Procedures

Warm-up Activity

(Distribute the handout *TV Dads Word Splash*.)

Ask students to brainstorm and to list the names of fictional television dads. After the students have completed their list, have them select one character and write that character's name in the middle of the circle in the second part of the *TV Dads Word Splash* handout. In the space around the character's name, have students write down characteristics of the TV dad they have chosen. Ask students to provide examples of each of these characteristics, with examples of events from the television program. You may choose to have students share their examples.

Guided Discussion

Almost every Canadian household has a TV (98 per cent according to Statistics Canada)¹ and Canadian youth ages 6-19 average about six hours of screen time per day, with TV programs (watched on a variety of different screens) accounting for much of this time.² Interest groups for fatherhood rights are concerned that young children may be bombarded with false perceptions of what dads are like. Many TV sitcom and ad dads are portrayed as selfish, senseless and overwhelmingly uninterested in their family.

1. Begin a class discussion by asking students to define the word "stereotype."

Explain to students that stereotypes are "fixed" or "set" beliefs about a group of people and that when we apply stereotypes, we assume that all members of a group are the same--like cookies made with the same cookie cutter. In the case of gender stereotypes, this means that if you are a girl or a woman, or a boy or a man, you are expected to act a certain way. Ask students why this might be a problem.

Let students know that the main problem with stereotypes is that they usually give us an incomplete or misleading picture, based on generalizations about groups of people--but without taking into account the diverse characteristics of individuals. Believing stereotypes also limits our personal choices in determining our own interests and skills. For example, a boy who likes flower arranging might worry about being called a "wimp" if he does this. A girl who wants to become an engineer might not choose this career because it is considered a "male" profession. Research on TV and children suggests that television viewing can have an impact on developing or reinforcing children's stereotypical attitudes and beliefs about gender.³

2. Distribute the student handout *TV Dads*. Read through and discuss the following questions:

- What are some common characteristics associated with sitcom dads?
- Are these characteristics consistent with how dads are portrayed in other genres (e.g., dramas)?
- Do you think most students your age believe that these characteristics are accurate? How about students who are younger?
- Why do you think these portrayals exist?
- How do sitcom dads compare with dads in other types of media, such as music and movies?
- How different are the TV ad dads from those who appear in TV sitcoms?



- Do ads showcasing the bumbling father reinforce stereotypes (whether they are overt or subconscious) that it is acceptable to leave the bulk of parenting to mom?
- Do they also reinforce the notion that a nurturing and domesticated male is un-masculine?

You may wish to ask students additional questions, and assign additional activities, to generate discussion or debate, such as:

- Do you think that the way dads are portrayed on television can influence the way people view father figures? Are these views influenced by other factors, such as a person’s age or family composition (multi-parents, single parent or same-sex parents)?
- What other gender stereotypes do you think exist in movies and TV shows? List some of the stereotypes of people your age and gender. How do these stereotypes compare with people you know in real life?

Activity: Huggies “Dad Test” Ad

Discuss with students the nature of interest and advocacy groups or organizations. Explain to students that they are groups of people working on behalf of, or strongly supporting, a particular cause. In the case of media advocacy organizations, they are often involved in monitoring media and can have an influence on the companies that create and broadcast media content.

In 2012, fatherhood interest groups were vocal in their criticism of an ad called “Dad Test” by Huggies. The ad suggests that putting having fathers “alone with their babies” was “the toughest test imaginable” and ended with one of the men’s wives saying “good luck.” Criticism of the campaign erupted on Facebook and led to a petition on the website Change.org, which prompted Huggies to pull the campaign.

 <p style="text-align: center;">“Dad Test”</p>	<p>View the commercial by clicking on the picture.</p>
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After viewing, you may want to ask students:

- How would you describe the fathers in this ad? What characteristics do they display?
- How does this portrayal compare with that of the mothers in the ad?
- How do the fathers’ characteristics compare with those of the fathers you know in everyday life?
- Why do you think fatherhood advocacy groups expressed their concern about the ad?



As an alternative to this activity, you can add your own examples of the way fathers are portrayed in TV ads and shows. Examples can be both positive and negative portrayals, which students can compare and contrast. This article collects several examples of commercials that depict dads – and fatherhood – in a positive light: http://thestir.cafemom.com/big_kid/151796/5_sweet_commercials_that_really.

Activity: From Sitcom to Sit-Real

Divide the class into groups of three or four. In each group, have students share their *TV Dads Word Splash*. Explain that the word "sitcom" means "situation comedy". Situation comedies are often premised on real life events or situations such as family dynamics. To heighten the interest of the everyday situation, sitcoms add humorous elements and strip away the realist portrayal of characters and events.

Ask students to pick an event from the examples in their *TV Dads Word Splash* and find a way to transform a sitcom into a more likely scenario, which you may even call a "sit-real," for "situation reality." Choose whether you would like students to act out the scenario or display the scenario through a series of tableaux (a representation of a scene without movement or sound, almost like a series of pictures), a radio play or a storyboard. Have each group perform or explain their work to the rest of the class.

Follow-up Activity

Ask students to keep a personal tally of examples (either good or bad) of how dads are portrayed in media over the course of a week. Students can use the handout *TV Dads Log* and start with television shows, but you may want them to expand into other forms of media, including magazines, music, movies and advertisements. Ask them to provide details, such as when and where they saw the portrayal, the type of media (e.g., television or movie) and their reasons for judging it to be either a positive or a negative portrayal.

- 1 BBM Canada, January 2013.
- 2 Active Healthy Kids Canada (2011) *Don't Let This Be The Most Physical Activity Our Kids Get After School. The Active Healthy Kids Canada 2011 Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth*. Toronto: Active Healthy Kids Canada.
- 3 See Jane Program, Dads and Daughters, *G Movies Give Boys a D: Portraying Males as Dominant, Disconnected and Dangerous*, May 2006.



TV Dads: Backgrounder for Teachers

Popular culture often reflects cultural changes in the real world. But how accurate are the images in our popular culture? Are the portrayals we see in our television programs, magazines and movies representations of reality?

Canadian kids average about six hours of screen time per day. A lot of this time is spent watching TV shows on a variety of different screens.¹ Studies have shown that children's TV use increases with age and that many children have almost constant access. Research by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that "19 per cent of children aged one year or younger have a TV in their bedroom, compared to 29 per cent of children two or three years old, and 43 per cent of children from four to six years old."² This easy access has some people concerned about how parents may use television as a companion to childhood development and how TV can be a major influence on the way young people form opinions. Previous research suggested that TV viewing can have an impact on developing or reinforcing children's stereotypical attitudes and beliefs about gender.³



Mom and Dad on TV

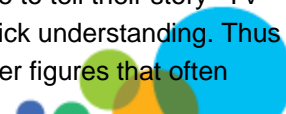
Gender roles for women and men have undergone significant changes since the introduction of TV. In the early days, the TV dad seemed flawless. He was intelligent, dependable and generally well respected in both the family and community. Times have changed on TV, and the "all-star fathers"--as represented by the dads on *Father Knows Best*, *Make Room for Daddy* and *My Three Sons*--have been replaced by the goofy, irresponsible and immature fathers of *Family Guy*, *Modern Family* and *Two and a Half Men*.

The paternalistic ideals of early TV dads passed with time as TV began to focus more on moms and kids to please the real-life wives and kids who watched the programs and the advertisements. The dads' personification of the old ideals of prudence, self-discipline and self-denial became an unfashionable ideology and an obvious drag on consumption.⁴

Just as the characteristics and roles of dads have changed, the role of moms has changed significantly. While men were the breadwinners who did not participate equally in childcare tasks, early programs showed women primarily as wives and mothers who did not work outside the home. Today's television programs present women in a greater spectrum of TV roles, often balancing the conflicting demands of career and family ambitions. As the presence of moms has increased in the workforce, dads have become more domestic.

TV Ad Dads

While most people would agree that the presence of father figures in domestic situations on TV is a good thing, many people are concerned about how fathers are portrayed. Interest groups for fatherhood rights often complain that many TV ads portray fathers as buffoons who get no respect in the home and cannot perform even the most minor of childcare tasks. Due to the time constraints of the format--advertisers have only 30 seconds of airtime to tell their story--TV ads typically rely on common stereotypes as a kind of "visual shorthand" to give audiences a quick understanding. Thus many ads rely on the easy laughs that a bumbling dad generates. Advertisers have created father figures that often



range from slightly inept to completely useless clowns (albeit lighthearted and well-intentioned clowns) when it comes to doing household chores and parenting their children.

The Modern Sit-Com Dad

Often, sit-com dads such as Peter Griffin and Phil Dunphy are portrayed as selfish and mindless. Although we believe that they love their children, storylines often portray their offspring as intrusions to other, more important pursuits such as drinking beer, watching TV or playing golf. These dads invest considerable time in thinking up schemes to avoid their family, and they appear overwhelmingly uninterested in everyone else's lives. Even TV dads who are portrayed as being well-meaning and interested in their kids, like *Modern Family's* Phil Dunphy, are portrayed as being clueless and make things more difficult by getting involved – at the same time as they're shown to be less masculine than less “traditional” dads.

Certainly these TV programs are not part of a grand conspiracy to attack dads, but there are enough existing examples to make many people concerned. In particular, fatherhood interest groups worry because these images have a negative influence on how very young children interpret father-child relationships, particularly in cases in which children may not have a father figure in their life.

While sitcoms have changed with the times, it is important to understand and think critically about how these programs are constructed to create humorous scenarios for entertainment value. The situations and characters in sitcoms are not true representations of reality.

- 1 Active Healthy Kids Canada (2011) *Don't Let This Be The Most Physical Activity Our Kids Get After School. The Active Healthy Kids Canada 2011 Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth*. Toronto: Active Healthy Kids Canada.
- 2 CTV.ca News, “Many Parents Encourage Tots to Watch TV: Study,” May 24, 2006 www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20060524/kids_tv_060524/20060524?hub=World
- 3 See Jane Program, Dads and Daughters, *G Movies Give Boys a D: Portraying Males as Dominant, Disconnected and Dangerous*, May 2006.
- 4 Mark Crispin Miller, Center for Media Literacy, “Dads Through the Decades: Thirty Years of TV Fathers,” 1986 www.medialit.org/reading_room/article38.html



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TV Dads Log

Enter examples of TV dad portrayals in the columns provided. Include such information as the date/time you saw the item, the TV network, the name of the program or a description of the advertisement, details of the portrayal and your reasons for judging it to be either a positive or a negative one.

+ Positive Examples	- Negative Examples

