



This Is Us?

How TV Does and Doesn't
Get Men's Caregiving

Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media
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Executive Summary

Americans watch *a lot* of television. Their households consume an average of two to eight hours a day, depending on how it's measured.¹ It makes sense, then, that television is an important force for how we understand and treat ourselves and others. That includes how we come to understand parenting and caregiving, including caring for children, aging parents, people with disabilities, and more. In recent decades, we've seen fathers like Homer Simpson (*The Simpsons*, Fox) and Phil Dunphy (*Modern Family*, ABC) delightfully stumble and surprisingly shine in their caregiving roles, and we've watched Uncle Phil (*Fresh Prince*, NBC) step up to care for his nephew, and Danny Tanner (*Full House*, ABC) fill his role as a single dad. And for many, Mister Rogers (*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, PBS) cared for viewers directly, addressing them in their living rooms as they watched.

But what is the current state of caregiving on television? In particular, how are men being shown as caregivers? How much do current shows validate and reinforce rigid models of male caregiving linked to unhealthy masculinity, or how do shows take the opposite tack and afford real-world men a roadmap toward “new fatherhood,” more balanced relationships with their partners, and positive relationships with their dependents? These portrayals are important for understanding men's actual caregiving. They likely also shape debates around public policies that affect those who are in care of others.²

To answer these questions, we analyzed 225 popular scripted broadcast and streaming television shows from 2013 to 2020. From the nearly one thousand characters we identified as caregivers, one overall finding stuck out: While men are depicted doing hands-on caregiving at higher rates than in the past, they are too often shown as abusive, incompetent, and/or emotionally distant. These persistent tropes point to the need for more stories that show men as imperfect but connected, emotionally responsive, invested, and equitable caregivers. Given that television has the power to shape our culture, we hope that this report will inspire new and reimagined stories about what caregiving can look like for the next generation.

Main Findings:

WHO DOES THE CAREGIVING?

- ▷ In recent years, men and women were shown as caregivers at a similar rate in popular TV shows.
- ▷ Most caregivers on popular scripted TV shows were portrayed by white actors. However, caregivers portrayed by people of color were increasingly more common. From 2013 to 2020, portrayals of caregiving by people of color increased from 21% to 42%.
- ▷ Female caregivers were doing one-third more on-screen caregiving tasks (such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, play) than male caregivers.
- ▷ In more recent TV scripted shows, men were doing more housework, but it was gender-stereotypical housework (such as fixing a sink, grilling, or painting) and not housework associated with domesticity (such as cleaning, cooking, or laundry).

TROPES: ABUSIVE, APPRENTICE, AND ABSENT DADS?

- ▷ Male caregivers were nearly two times more likely than female caregivers to be shown as incompetent — a perpetuation of the “apprentice dad” trope.
- ▷ Male caregivers were one and a half times more likely than female caregivers to be emotionally abusive, and four times more likely to be physically abusive — a perpetuation of the “abusive dad” trope.
- ▷ Male caregivers were less likely than female caregivers to be depicted as affectionate, supportive, or offering emotional care.
- ▷ Just as representations matter, so do words. We chose male *caregivers* as a broader definition of the many kinds of caregiving men do, including but not exclusive to being fathers. This includes caring of elderly parents, siblings, other family members, adopted children, as well as the diversity of biological and social fathers.



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Recommendations

#1 BREAK DOWN GENDER STEREOTYPES AROUND HOUSEWORK: Show men doing stereotypically feminized tasks, like cooking and cleaning, and show women doing stereotypically masculinized tasks, like mowing the lawn or fixing the sink. This study found a gender divide in the caregiving tasks shown on the most popular broadcast and streaming television.

#2 DISRUPT THE MALE-BREADWINNER MODEL: Show effective co-parenting and networks as well as communities of care. Dual-income families are the norm nowadays, but representations of these families were relatively rare in the programs analyzed.

#3 HELP MALE CAREGIVERS UP WHEN THEY GET KNOCKED DOWN, AGAIN: Center stories on the vulnerability of male caregivers, such as them talking to other men about their emotions and/or seeking professional help. This study found that male caregivers were less likely than female caregivers to show emotion or affection.

#4 MODEL MALE ACCOUNTABILITY: Avoid storylines with simplistic family-reconciliation narratives wherein male caregivers are forgiven simply because “family is family,” without much effort on the part of the male caregiver — or any caregiver — to acknowledge the harm done and change their behavior.

#5 DIVERSIFY MALE CAREGIVERS: Subvert or avoid racial stereotypes in depictions of male caregivers. Seek a diverse team of screenwriters to script complex portrayals of male caregiving. This study found that white male caregivers outnumbered all male caregivers of color, more than two to one.

#6 EMBRACE MORE STORYTELLING ABOUT CARE AND CAREGIVING: Tell more stories that draw inspiration from the ups and downs of real life caregiving. Audiences respond positively to complex stories of caregiving, and because of the COVID-19 pandemic, care and caregiving have never been more central to our lives — and television plays a key role in affirming that for viewers.



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Introduction

Women are still doing more care work than men, but change is slowly happening. Today, nearly as many women are in the labor force as men,³ yet women still handle most household chores and the majority of childcare and eldercare responsibilities.⁴ Globally, women are tasked with three to ten times more caregiving than men, with this ratio varying from country to country.⁵ Survey research suggests that men are increasingly aware of caregiving imbalances⁶ and are carrying out more of these tasks than they did in the past.⁷ Yet women still report more challenges with balancing work and caregiving responsibilities. For example, in a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2019, working mothers were more likely than working fathers to cite childcare responsibilities as an obstacle to working a full-time position and to career advancement.⁸ And the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these difficulties.⁹ Additionally, women are responsible for caregiving that requires greater cognitive labor,¹⁰ while men are carrying out primarily physical tasks, such as home maintenance, repair, lawn and garden care, and shopping for groceries and supplies; importantly, tasks that are associated with men are more episodic and occur less frequently.¹¹

Our central question is: Do stories of men’s caregiving match what is happening in real households? In this report, we consider whether representations of caregiving in popular media match the realities and challenges of caregiving. We analyze the traits and behaviors of male and female caregivers¹² in top scripted streaming and broadcast programming from 2013 to 2020, and we explore the gendered tropes and stereotypes that can dominate characterizations of care work and parental relationships. We also consider trends in representation over time in order to determine whether depictions of caregiving are shifting alongside broader social changes. This analysis offers insights into the ways that norms about who does care work and how they do it are conveyed through popular media; such portrayals shape people’s expectations about how responsibility for this work is negotiated in their own lives, often perpetuating gendered divisions of care work. Given our findings, we provide recommendations for television writers, producers, performers, and executives as well as caregiving social media influencers, gender-equity organizations, academics, and caregivers everywhere.



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Caregiving Portrayals and Realities

How men’s caregiving is shown on TV matters. Media representations of fatherhood and male caregiving convey cultural expectations and norms surrounding paternal behavior. According to the 2020 American Time Use Survey,¹³ the average American man watches 3.3 hours of television every day and, in doing so, is regularly exposed to representations of masculinity and caregiving.¹⁴ Past research shows that exposure to media representations of men as sexually aggressive, emotionally remote, and violent shapes men’s beliefs that these are masculine norms they should adhere to in their day-to-day lives.¹⁵ In a similar fashion, representations of fatherhood and caregiving can influence men’s behavior by providing role models, offering examples of what counts as good and bad caregiving,¹⁶ creating “social scripts” for caregiving,¹⁷ and shaping beliefs about the nature of gender roles and the gendered division of labor more broadly.¹⁸ Essentially, popular media creates and communicates the standards men aspire to as fathers and caregivers.

Media representations of male caregivers have shifted over time in response to major social changes and political events. For instance, the “breadwinner dad” trope prevailed in popular media following World War II, at a time when women’s greater workplace involvement disrupted traditional gender roles. Media depictions of the (usually white and middle-class) nuclear family stressed a return to a more traditional division of labor, with fathers in a breadwinning role and mothers in the domestic, caregiving role.¹⁹ The work of mothers and fathers was presented as distinct but complementary, with a father’s labor occurring in the public sphere and a mother’s in the home.²⁰

In the 1960s and 1970s, representations evolved in reaction to women’s growing educational attainment and workforce participation, rising divorce rates, and the women’s movement’s critique of rigid gender roles. These social changes posed a challenge to notions of parenting based on “separate spheres,” where domestic responsibilities fell wholly on women, and sparked broader interest in possibilities for co-parenting or “parental equality.”²¹ The result was a broader

conceptualization of fatherhood and male caregiving — sometimes referred to as “new fatherhood”²² — that emphasized caregiving activities and traits that ran counter to some of the dated stereotypes about both fatherhood and masculinity.²³

What do we mean by masculinity — or even masculinities — in this report?

The term “masculinity” refers to the traits and qualities associated with being a man. Ideas related to how men should act or what is considered manly are instilled from a young age and are often understood in opposition to ideas about femininity, or what we associate with women. These restrictive, oppositional ideas can be imposed even before birth — say, painting the nursery with a sports theme for a boy or princess theme for a girl — and are evident in the marketing of toys, deodorants, writing utensils, and a variety of other products and goods.²⁴ This is also true of popular entertainment, of course, as this report explores in new depth.

Ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman are just that: ideas. They are not hardwired in our bodies or biology, and they sideline the realities of people with nonbinary or fluid gender identities. Raewyn Connell, a preeminent scholar on masculinity and gender, has helped show how sticking to just one definition of masculinity — often based on stoicism, aversion to caregiving, physical strength, sexual prowess, and/or other characteristics — creates a barrier for men to become actively involved in their children's lives. Connell argues convincingly that there are multitudes of ways to be a man.²⁵ As such, embracing the term and the concept of masculinities — plural — can be empowering for the many men who do not subscribe to any single or culturally dominant style of masculinity, and it can open the door for caregiving to become a central part of any man's masculine identity.

In recent years, masculinity has often been portrayed in overly simplistic terms, including the use of the term “toxic masculinity.” While many men and boys were taught clearly negative ideas of manhood by society, pop culture, and so on, the term “toxic masculinity” too often leads to men feeling defensive, often ending any meaningful opportunity to engage them (and all of us) in thoughtful, compassionate, and aspirational conversations about how they (and all of us) can be their most connected, equitable, and caring selves. To read more, check out this 2016 report, “State of America's Fathers,” which you can access here: <https://promundoglobal.org/resources/state-americas-fathers>.

Although media representations of fatherhood and male caregiving are more diverse today, certain tropes persist in fragmented and even contradictory ways. As noted above, the “breadwinner dad” emphasizes traditional gender roles, with fathers cast as dominant, stern, and emotionally stoic, in contrast to mothers who are more nurturant and have expressive qualities.²⁶ While conceptualizations of fatherhood have broadened to communicate the importance of emotional engagement and quality time, breadwinning still plays a major role in how people envision fatherhood,²⁷ and representations haven't abandoned breadwinning so much as expanded in a way that outlines roles for men in both the public and private spheres.

In the journal article “Loving Fathers or Deadbeat Dads: The Crisis of Fatherhood in Popular Culture,” Tabitha Freeman offers a typology of fatherhood representations consisting of failing-father types (the deadbeat dad, the absentee dad, the abusive dad, and the apprentice dad) and successful-father types (the celebrity dad and the Adonis dad).²⁸ For the successful types, fathers are defined by idealized (and arguably unrealistic) economic and physical standards. The celebrity dad represents the pinnacle of the provider role; he is financially successful, and the caregiving he provides doesn't detract from this image. The Adonis dad represents the pinnacle of the male physique and shows up most commonly in advertising, often as a muscular, hypersexualized man juxtaposed against his fragile children or the women around him.

The unsuccessful-father types reflect different ways that men fail to live up to the ideals of new fatherhood. The deadbeat dad is immature and shirks provider expectations, whereas the absentee dad abdicates fatherhood altogether. The abusive dad is aggressive, violent, punitive, and sometimes sexually deviant — often an extreme manifestation of the most regressive masculine traits. This trope is used to highlight the danger men can pose to children. The apprentice dad is portrayed as a fish out of water when it comes to parenting. This type of dad is often presented in comedic terms that highlight how men struggle when they operate outside of their “normal sphere” and take on more caregiving responsibilities. Collectively, these tropes do little to challenge traditional stereotypes about gender roles and gendered traits. Instead, they cast doubt on men’s potential to live up to the ideals of fatherhood. In this report, we analyze the prevalence of these failing-father types.

Beyond these basic tropes, media representations of male caregivers also vary along dimensions like class, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, and sexual orientation.²⁹ For example, prior academic work on fathers notes that men of color are often portrayed negatively,³⁰ though more recent work suggests that representations are shifting in a positive direction, such that dads of color are now portrayed as competent and engaged parents.³¹ Additionally, working-class fathers are often portrayed more negatively than middle-class fathers, which may reflect judgment regarding men’s competence in the breadwinning role.³² In the analysis that follows, we consider the prevalence of these common tropes in mainstream entertainment media and compare fathers based on their racial, ethnic, and class identifications.

Has popular scripted television programming kept up with changes in men’s orientation toward caregiving? What it means to be a male caregiver has shifted over time, as have men’s willingness and eagerness to take on more caregiving responsibilities.³³ Men now report greater satisfaction with the amount of time spent with their children,³⁴ and more men express interest in striking a better balance between their work and home life.³⁵ To find out if portrayals of male caregivers on television reflect these changes, we analyzed caregiving representations on popular broadcast and streaming television from 2013³⁶ to 2020, looking for the balance of caregiving between partners and for evidence of common tropes and stereotypes associated with male caregiving. Here’s what we found.



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Methodology

For this study, we analyzed depictions of caregiving in the top scripted television shows from broadcast and streaming services between 2013 and 2020. Broadcast programming includes shows that air on public airwaves, while streaming services are typically subscription models. For broadcast, the top-fifteen scripted shows for each year were identified using ratings data from Nielsen, for a total of 120 shows. Because no analogous viewership data exists for streaming content during this time period, shows were chosen based on evaluations of the best shows for Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu according to editorials on the website Rotten Tomatoes.³⁷ As there were not fifteen scripted shows yet released on each platform before 2015, the total number of streaming shows in the sample is 105, for a total of 225 shows. In total, 995 caregivers were identified, 483 of whom were men.

We reviewed and analyzed popular scripted TV shows to systematically identify how men’s caregiving showed up. Content analysis is a research technique to objectively and systematically collect data for qualitative and quantitative analysis. For this project, researchers analyzed the sampled programming with the guidance of assessment protocol. This protocol laid out instructions to identify observations of interest (e.g., caregivers showing affection or discipline) for later assessment.

IDENTIFYING DEMOGRAPHICS

When determining characters’ demographics, we prioritized information provided within the episode, both explicitly (e.g., a character mentioning their age) and contextually (e.g., it isn’t stated explicitly that a character is Latino, but they refer to their grandmother as their “abuela”). When the episode did not provide demographic information, the actor’s race, gender, and age were looked up using verifiable sources.³⁸ As these are embodied identities that are ideally aligned between actor and character, we used the actor’s demographic information as the default.³⁹

QUANTIFYING CAREGIVING

We looked at men's caregiving including and beyond being biological fathers and/or fathers of young children. For this report, a character was identified as a "caregiver" if they were shown as or implied to be an unpaid caregiver to a dependent. Dependents included biological children, children through adoption, friends' children, nephews/nieces, grandchildren, and adults who need care. Throughout this report, there are references to several elements of caregiving, including types of care work shown, styles of care, and obstacles caregivers may face. Below is a list of these caregiving variables. For additional information about how they are defined and their frequency within the dataset, please see the Appendix.

Types of caregiving tasks analyzed:

- Emotional care
- Play and leisure activities
- Discipline
- Transportation
- Feminized housework and chores
- Masculinized housework and chores
- Logistics of caregiving
- Physical needs

Types of caregiving behaviors analyzed:

- Affection and love
- Support and encouragement
- Needs instruction
- Clingy
- Indifference
- Incompetence
- Emotionally abusive
- Physically abusive
- Negligence
- Violent protector
- Struggles and obstacles analyzed:
 - Financial burden of caregiving
 - Balancing profession/work and caregiving responsibilities
 - Balancing social life and caregiving responsibilities



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Analysis

WHO IS A CAREGIVER?

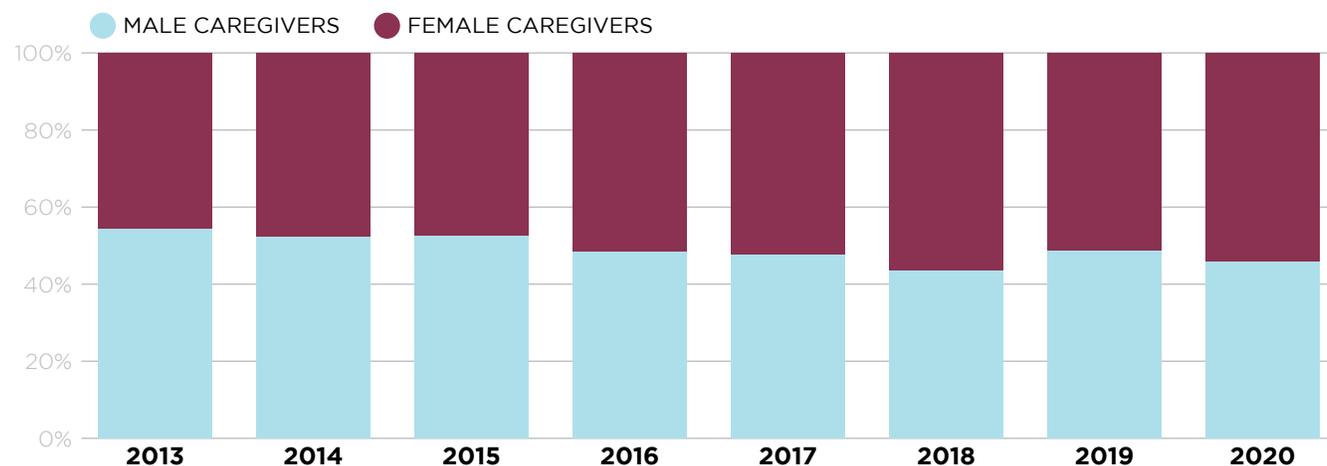
What does caregiving look like in popular scripted broadcast and streaming television shows?

Overall, male and female caregivers made up a similar share of all caregivers depicted on popular TV shows, but over the course of the years analyzed, nearly three in four caregivers were white (71.7% white, 28.3% people of color). Just 3.8% of caregivers were identified as LGBTQIA+, and 2.5% were identified as people with a disability. Less than 1% were identified as lower income or poor, while 8% were working class, 80.9% were middle or upper-middle class, and 10.4% were upper class/wealthy.

Over time, the balance of male and female caregivers on screen remained largely steady, with a slight downward trend for the share of male caregivers (Chart 1). Differences between broadcast and streaming are shown in Table 1.

CHART 1 • What share of caregivers on popular TV shows were men?

The share of female caregivers depicted on popular TV shows increased over time



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis is of all 995 caregiver characters in the top-fifteen scripted broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not fifteen scripted shows yet released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225.

TABLE 1 • Share of male and female caregivers on broadcast and streaming

YEAR	MALE CAREGIVERS		FEMALE CAREGIVERS	
	BROADCAST	STREAMING	BROADCAST	STREAMING
2013	56.7%	20.0%	43.3%	80.0%
2014	59.7%	36.7%	40.3%	63.3%
2015	50.8%	54.2%	49.2%	45.8%
2016	52.5%	44.8%	47.5%	55.2%
2017	52.9%	43.2%	47.1%	56.8%
2018	54.7%	35.2%	45.3%	64.8%
2019	53.7%	45.3%	46.3%	54.7%
2020	46.2%	45.6%	53.8%	54.4%

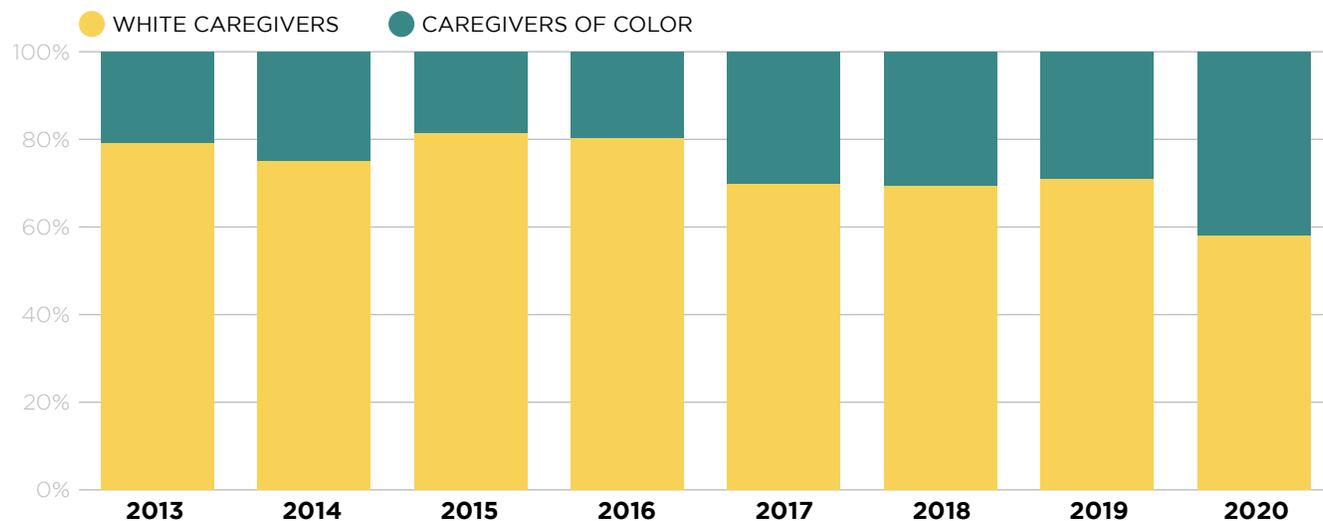
Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

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Over time, there was an increase in the share of people of color shown in caregiver roles on popular scripted TV shows. In 2020, the most recent year analyzed, 42.1% of caregivers shown were people of color, up from 29.0% in 2019 and from 20.8% in 2013 (see Chart 2). Differences between broadcast and streaming shows is shown in Table 2.

CHART 2 • What share of caregivers on popular TV shows were white?

Most caregivers depicted on popular TV shows were white, but the share of caregivers of color increased over time



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis is of all 995 caregiver characters in the top-fifteen scripted broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not fifteen scripted shows yet released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225.

TABLE 2 • Share of white caregivers and caregivers of color on broadcast and streaming shows

YEAR	WHITE CAREGIVERS		CAREGIVERS OF COLOR	
	BROADCAST	STREAMING	BROADCAST	STREAMING
2013	79.1%	80.0%	20.9%	20.0%
2014	77.4%	69.2%	22.6%	30.8%
2015	80.3%	82.5%	19.7%	17.5%
2016	72.9%	86.6%	27.1%	13.4%
2017	72.1%	67.9%	27.9%	32.1%
2018	62.3%	74.6%	37.7%	25.4%
2019	79.6%	65.5%	20.4%	34.5%
2020	62.5%	50.7%	37.5%	49.3%

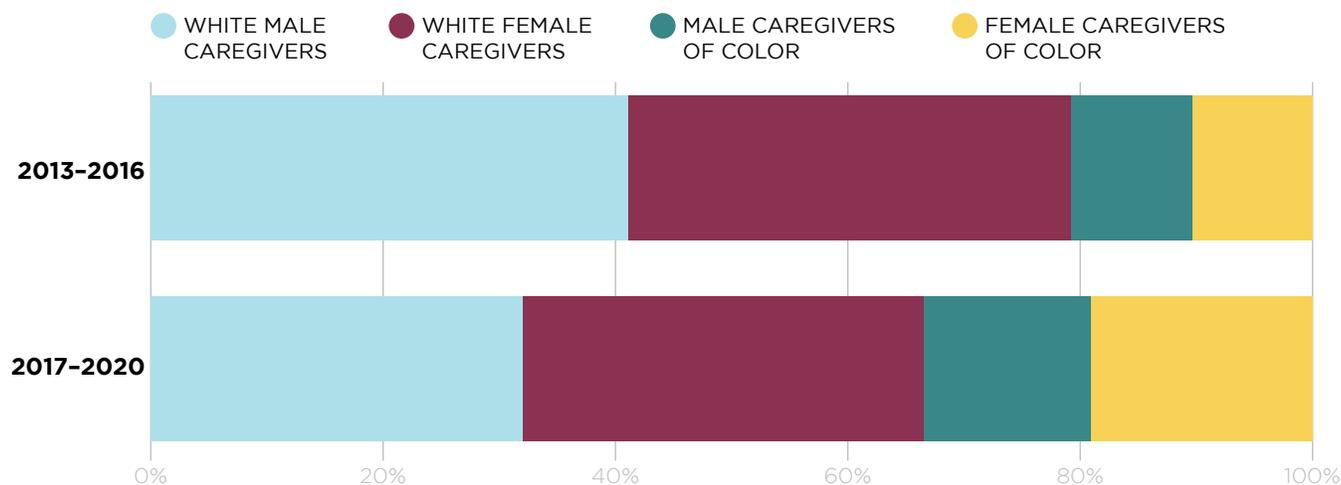
Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis is of all 995 caregiver characters in the top-fifteen scripted broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not fifteen scripted shows yet released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225.

As shown in Chart 3, between 2013 and 2020, the share of white male caregivers on popular TV shows decreased nearly 16% (from 43.1% to 27.5%), while the share of male caregivers of color increased by 9% (from 11.1% to 18.1%). From 2013–2016, men and women of color were about 10% of caregivers shown; from 2017–2020, the share of each increased, though the increase was greater for women of color (a 9-point increase for women of color, compared with a 4-point increase for men of color).

CHART 3 • What share of caregivers on popular TV shows were men of color?

The share of caregivers on popular TV shows who were men of color slightly increased over time



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis of all 995 caregiver characters in the top-fifteen scripted broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not fifteen scripted shows yet released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225. Findings are grouped into two time periods — 2013 to 2016, and 2017 to 2020 — to identify clearer trends, given small sample sizes.

Most caregivers on popular TV shows were white men or white women, but among people of color, Black men and Black women made up the largest share of caregivers, followed by Asian or Pacific Islander men and women, Latino/a men and women, Middle Eastern or North African men and women; Native or Indigenous men and women were the least likely to be shown as caregivers (see Table 3).

TABLE 3 • Caregiving and racial representation on popular TV shows

	2013–2016		2017–2020	
	MALE CAREGIVERS	FEMALE CAREGIVERS	MALE CAREGIVERS	FEMALE CAREGIVERS
White	41.1%	38.1%	32.0%	34.5%
Black	5.9%	4.7%	7.6%	9.6%
Asian or Pacific Islander	3.0%	3.2%	2.6%	4.3%
Latino/a	1.0%	2.0%	2.4%	3.8%
Middle Eastern or North African	0.5%	0.5%	1.7%	1.2%
Native/Indigenous	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%

Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis is of all 995 caregiver characters in the top-fifteen scripted broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not fifteen scripted shows yet released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225. Findings are grouped into two time periods — 2013 to 2016, and 2017 to 2020 — to identify clearer trends, given small sample sizes.

In the shows analyzed, caregivers were not always the lead, colead, or part of an ensemble cast. Oftentimes, caregivers were in supporting or minor roles. Caregivers in supporting roles would include a caregiver who brings their older mother or their young child into the hospital in an episode of *Grey's Anatomy*, or they may be rescued in an episode of *NCIS*, or they may appear as the suspect in an episode of *Person of Interest*. This distinction is important because caregivers in leading, coleading, or ensemble-cast roles are more developed and, therefore, have more opportunities to be shown in dynamic ways, like those we measure in this report. As reported in Table 4, most leading caregiver roles were portrayed by white women (40.8%), followed by white men (36.7%), women of color (13.8%), then men of color (8.7%).

TABLE 4 • Caregiver prominence on popular TV shows

Caregivers in leading roles on popular TV shows were most likely to be played by white women and white men

	WHITE WOMEN	WHITE MEN	WOMEN OF COLOR	MEN OF COLOR
Leading Characters	40.8%	36.7%	13.8%	8.7%
Supporting Characters	34.3%	37.3%	14.7%	13.7%
Minor Characters	37.6%	24.8%	23.1%	14.5%

Analysis is of all 995 caregiver characters. In total, 198 caregivers were in leading roles, 675 were in supporting roles, and 122 were in minor roles.



MoMo Productions/Digital Vision via Getty Images

The Balance of Care

How were men shown caregiving on popular TV shows? In reality, caregiving disparities in the home are still prevalent, with more women than men carrying out daily caregiving tasks.⁴⁰ Men and women also tend to perform different caregiving roles at home. For instance, women are more likely to anticipate and monitor family needs,⁴¹ but men spend more time on tasks such as home maintenance, repair, lawn and garden care, and shopping for groceries and supplies — tasks that are episodic and occur less frequently, and are less likely to involve the person receiving the care.⁴²

Yet men are increasingly aware of this imbalance in domestic work,⁴³ and today, they are doing a greater share of the caregiving than in previous decades.⁴⁴ While the balance of caregiving is in flux, it is still important to understand how it is portrayed on popular television. To assess the balance of caregiving on popular television, we looked at male and female caregivers and the “breadth of care” they provided, as well as whether male and female caregivers were shown engaging in gender-stereotypical caregiving or if programming subverts such stereotypes.

THE BREADTH OF CAREGIVING

To measure the breadth of caregiving, we considered the number of caregiving behaviors analyzed (Table 5) that were carried out by male and female caregivers. Caregiving tasks come in many forms, but in order to systematically analyze who was shown doing the caregiving tasks in the television programs, this study identified the tasks in Table 5 and documented when they appeared on screen.

TABLE 5 • Types of caregiving tasks analyzed in this study

- Emotional care (e.g., comforting, soothing, listening, reassuring)
- Traditionally feminized housework or chores (e.g., cooking, cleaning, laundry)
- Traditionally masculinized housework or chores (e.g., performing car maintenance and home repairs, barbecuing)
- Transportation (e.g., driving care receivers)
- Playing (e.g., playing games and sports, coloring, doing outdoors activities)
- Discipline e.g., chastising, stern lecturing, yelling, taking away privileges, grounding)
- Logistics (e.g., planning play dates, scheduling doctor visits)
- Physical needs (e.g., carrying a young child, feeding a disabled dependent)

Caregiving tasks come in many forms. In order to systematically analyze who carried out caregiving in the television programs, this study identified these tasks and documents when they appeared on screen.

Women on popular TV shows were more often shown doing more caregiving tasks than men were, however the difference is small. On average, caregivers on popular television programs were shown doing just one caregiving task (mean = 1.0), with many identified caregivers not shown doing (or not implied to be doing) any caregiving task. Looking separately at men and women, we saw that, on average, female caregivers were shown doing 1.2 tasks, compared with male caregivers, who were shown doing 0.9 tasks. This is a small but statistically significant difference ($p \leq .001$). This average for 2013 to 2016 was the same as that for 2017 to 2020.

Although the findings show female caregivers doing more tasks than male caregivers, there are cases when this stereotype was subverted. For instance, in an opening scene of an episode of *Love, Victor*,⁴⁵ a Latina mother is shown relaxing at breakfast, chatting with her children, while her Latino husband prepares and serves the family their meal. Of course, decades of television has shown the opposite — a husband kicking back while his wife juggles dinner and the laundry without any help. But television today can give us glimpses of different realities, with more balanced caregiving.

CAREGIVING AND GENDER NORMS

Does men's caregiving on popular scripted TV shows these days follow old gender stereotypes? In addition to the breadth of caregiving shown, we were interested in whether men were shown doing stereotypically masculinized caregiving tasks and women were shown doing stereotypically feminized caregiving tasks. Stereotypically masculinized tasks included yard work, barbecuing, or handiwork (e.g., fixing things around the house). Stereotypically feminized tasks included cooking, cleaning, or laundry.

In the television programs analyzed, male and female caregivers generally carried out gender-stereotypical tasks. When feminized tasks were shown, women were about two times more likely than men to be carrying them out, and when masculinized tasks were shown, men were three times more likely than women to be shown carrying them out.

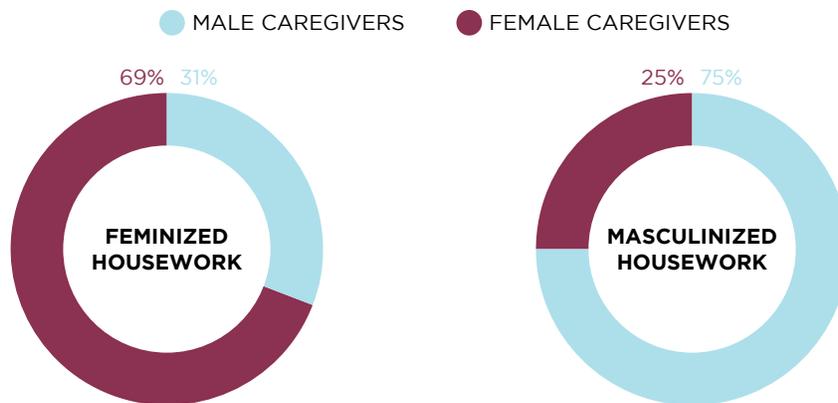
But male caregivers were still shown doing feminized housework. In an episode of *9-1-1*, the character Eddie Diaz is a caregiver to his young son with a disability and, in one particular episode, is shown cleaning up spills and messes and cooking for him and his son. In an episode of *This Is Us*, the character William, Randall's father, cooks for his grandchildren.

"[Common narratives in TV shows suggest] that a man is incompetent as a caregiver. That it is the man's role to be the breadwinner. That kids needs their mother to be the primary parent. That men can't manage life at home because they are somehow hardwired for bumbling through basic, repeatable tasks that have nothing to do with gender."

PAUL SULLIVAN
 Founder of *The Company of Dads* and former
New York Times columnist

CHART 4 • Was caregiving gendered on popular TV shows?

Female caregivers on popular TV shows were two times more likely than male caregivers to do “feminized” caregiving, while male caregivers were three times more likely than female caregivers to do “masculinized” caregiving

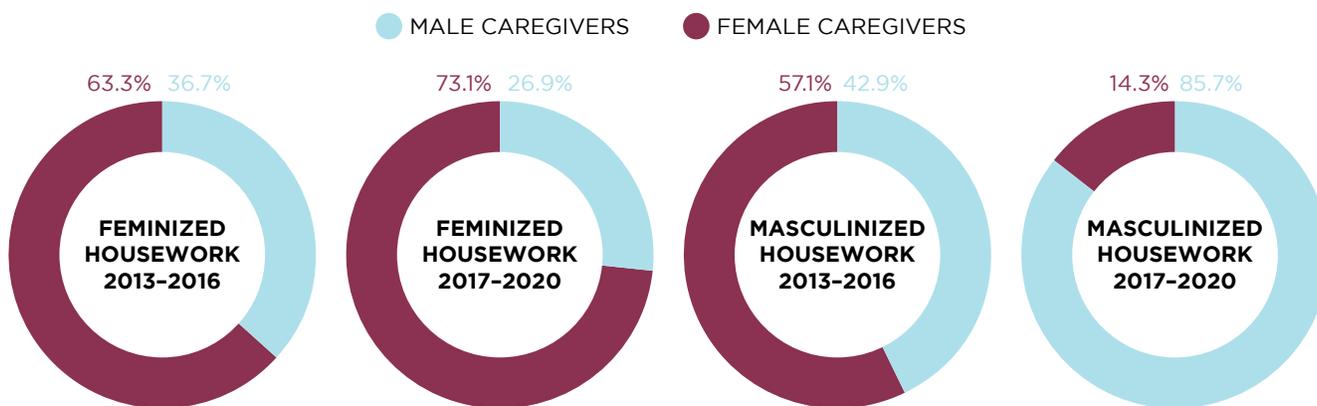


Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media
 Analysis is of caregivers shown (or implied to be) doing feminized and/or masculinized housework. In total, 116 characters were shown doing a task deemed to be “feminized housework,” and 28 characters were shown doing a task deemed to be “masculinized housework.”

Is gender-stereotypical caregiving on TV declining? Comparing 2013–2016 to 2017–2020, we found that male caregivers in more recent years were shown doing a smaller share of feminized housework and much higher share of masculinized housework. Male caregivers were shown doing *more* caregiving tasks overall, but these tasks were largely masculinized, which reinforces stereotypes about the narrow range of caregiving normally performed by men. Female caregivers performed a similar share of feminized housework in each time period but a smaller share of masculinized housework in more recent years.

CHART 5 • Did portrayals of gendered caregiving change over time on popular TV shows?

Male caregivers’ housework was more gender-stereotypical in more recent popular TV programming than in older programming



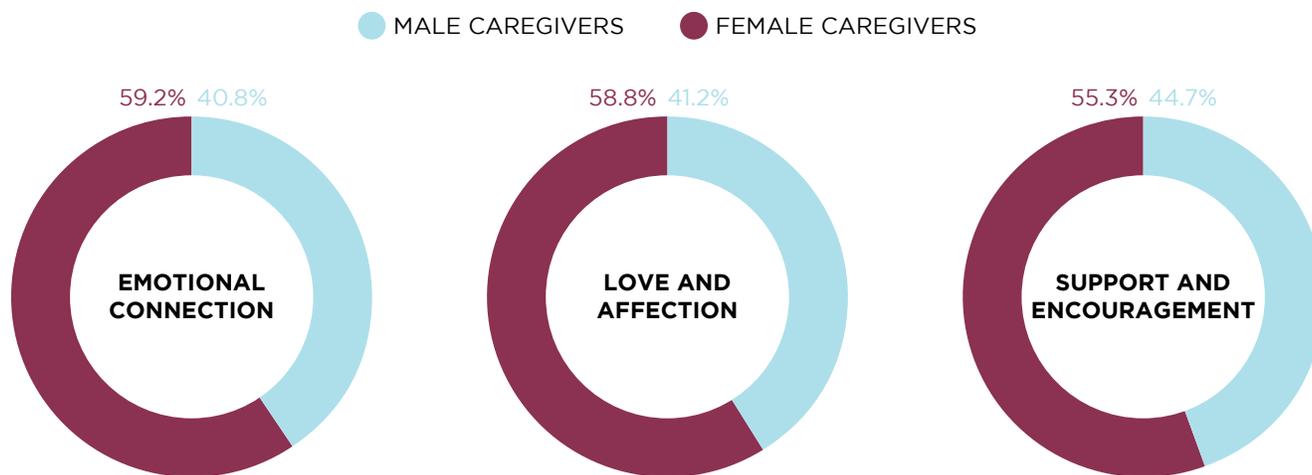
Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media
 Analysis is of caregivers shown (or implied to be) doing feminized and/or masculinized housework. In total, 116 characters were shown doing a task deemed to be “feminized housework,” and 28 characters were shown doing a task deemed to be “masculinized housework.”

Female caregivers on popular scripted TV shows tended to be more compassionate caregivers.

Female caregivers were more likely than their male caregivers to be shown engaged in emotional care, such as empathetic listening or consoling (59.2%); more likely to be portrayed as affectionate, such as giving wanted physical attention or saying, "I love you" (58.8%); and more likely to be depicted as supportive, such as encouraging talents or being championing their goals (55.3%). Altogether, this reinforces women's association with warm and affectionate caregiving.

CHART 6 • Which caregivers on popular TV shows were more compassionate?

When compassionate caregiving was shown on popular TV shows, it was more likely to come from female caregivers



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis is of caregivers shown being compassionate. In total, 289 characters were shown expressing emotional connection, 169 characters were shown expressing love and affection, and 164 were shown expressing support and encouragement for a care receiver.

“TV can reflect back to us what we are and what we hope to be. By depicting men as equal co-parents, as thoughtful and involved partners and caregivers, as providing loving and affectionate attention and hands-on care to their children and adults in their family who need care, TV shows can reflect back men’s hopes and desires when it comes to care.”

VICKI SHABO

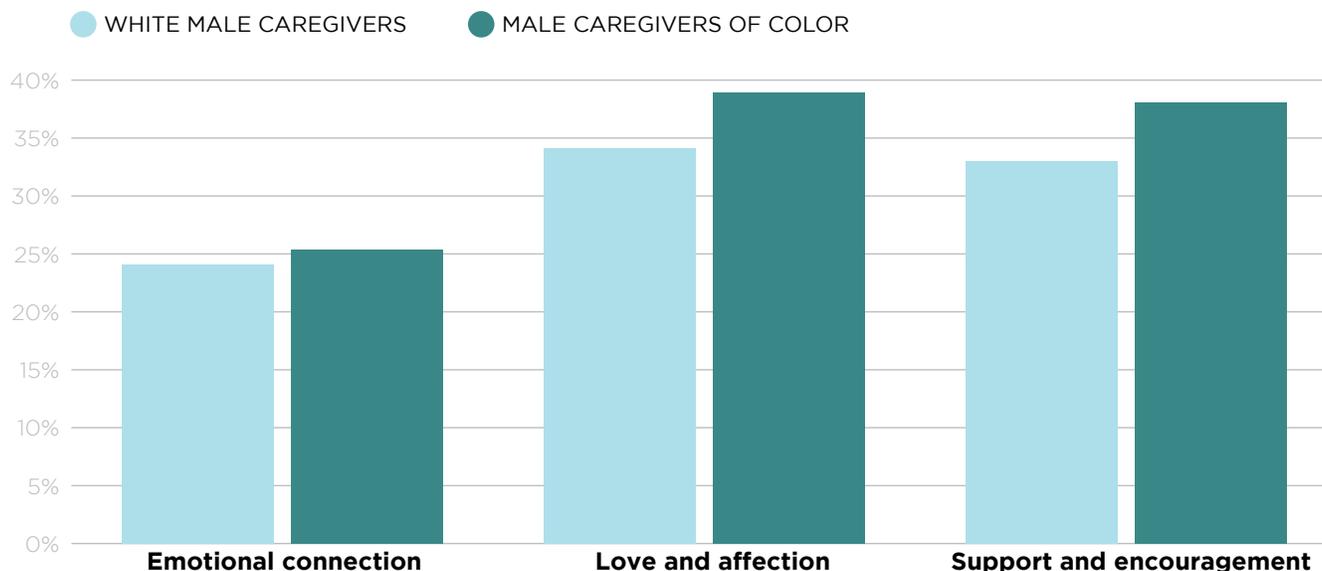
Senior Fellow, *New America*

While some male caregivers on popular scripted TV shows did provide emotional care, the majority did not, which represents a major gap in how men show up on these shows. This is true both for white male caregivers and male caregivers of color on popular scripted TV shows we looked at. Chart 7 displays the share of each group (white men and men of color) who were shown providing compassionate caregiving. Male caregivers of color were slightly more likely than white male caregivers to be shown being compassionate, but the differences are not statistically significant.

One positive depiction of compassionate caregiving from a male caregiver is in an episode of *PEN15*, where a white father supports his biracial daughter, who is the lead in a high-school play, by arriving to the play early, giving her flowers after the show, and bragging about his daughter’s performance to patrons at a restaurant afterward.⁴⁶ This depiction shows a father recognizing the role’s importance to his daughter and being exuberantly supportive of her.

CHART 7 • Compassionate caregiving among white male caregivers and male caregivers of color on popular TV shows

There are not significant differences in compassionate caregiving for white male caregivers and male caregivers of color on popular TV shows



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media
 Percent reported is the share of male caregivers for each group shown displaying compassionate caregiving. Analysis considers all 483 male caregiver characters in the top-fifteen scripted broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not yet fifteen scripted shows released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225.

Comparing 2013–2016 with 2017–2020 revealed an increase in depictions of all types of caregiving associated with compassion. The positive change in the amount of support and encouragement shown by both male and female caregivers is substantial (a 10-point increase for male caregivers and 12-point increase for female caregivers) and statistically significant.



SDI Productions/E+ via Getty Images

Same Old Stories?

Male caregivers on popular scripted TV shows too often showed up as tropes — incomplete and often stereotyped versions of men’s complex realities. In this section, we assess the prevalence of caregiving tropes to see whether one-dimensional depictions of male caregiving were common. Although there is no shortage of character tropes about male caregivers in popular television, this analysis focuses on three particularly prominent — and mostly negative — character tropes:

1. The Abusive Dad
2. The Apprentice Dad
3. The Absentee Dad

To assess the prevalence of these tropes, the data collection focused on several behaviors, qualities, and traits associated with each, and the analysis draws out which caregivers embodied these attributes and if their prevalence has changed over time.

ABUSIVE DADS

The “abusive dad” trope can take many forms. A more extreme portrayal is a male caregiver who is emotionally and/or physically abusive. But “abusive dads” are also more subtly emotionally or psychologically abusive, and depictions of them can include caregiving figures who enforce a rigid vision of masculinity, especially on younger men. For example, a male caregiver who tells a child to “toughen up” or that “real men don’t cry” when the child is dealing with social or psychological stress. We found that while depictions of emotional and physical abuse were rare on popular scripted TV shows, the depictions were more common for male caregivers than for female caregivers.

“At times I see myself portrayed in ways that are no longer relevant to my practice of caregiving, whether to my children, my partner, my parents, my siblings, my extended family and my friends.”

DAVID KUHL

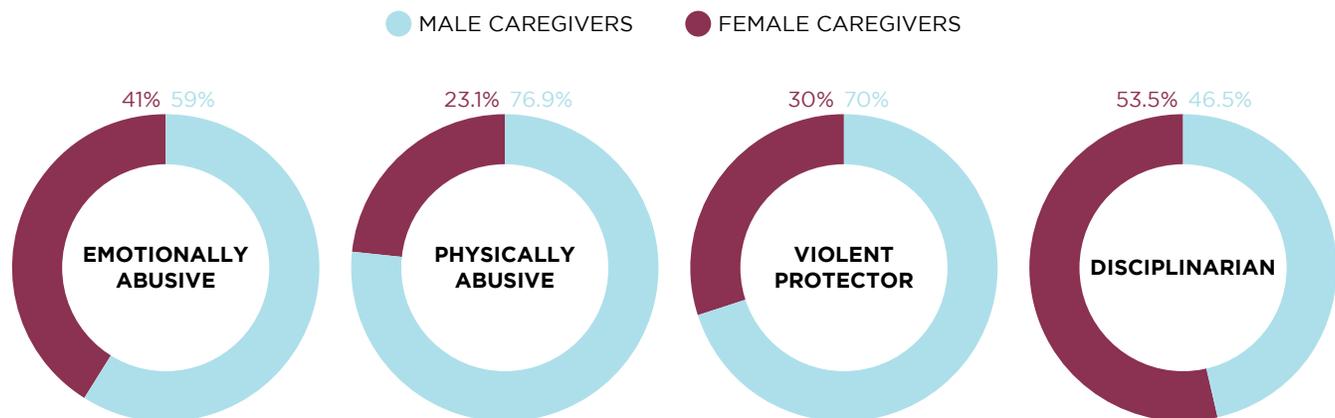
*M.D., Ph.D., Co-Founder of Blueprint;
Professor of Family Practice and Urological
Sciences, and Family of Medicine, The
University of British Columbia*

Male caregivers on popular scripted TV shows were one and a half times more likely than female caregivers to be depicted as emotionally abusive (however, this difference is not statistically significant). We saw emotional abuse, such as a father who makes their young daughter choose which parent she wants to live with following a divorce, and a male caregiver who makes fun of a child because of his sexuality.

Male caregivers on popular scripted TV shows were three times more likely than female caregivers to be depicted as physically abusive. Overall, however, just 2% of male caregivers were shown in

CHART 8 • The “abusive dad” in popular TV shows

Male caregivers on popular TV shows were more physically abusive and violent, but both male and female caregivers on popular TV shows were emotionally abusive and disciplinarians



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis is of all caregivers shown being abusive or as disciplinarians. In total, 39 caregivers were shown as emotionally abusive, 13 as physically abusive, 30 as violent protectors, and 99 as disciplinarians. Emotional abuse is a caregiver who manipulates, belittles, gaslights, or humiliates the care receiver. Physical abuse is when the caregiver physically harms the care receiver.

this manner. We also looked at the adjacent “violent protector” trope (e.g., Liam Neeson in the *Taken* franchise or the “mama grizzly” counterpart). This limited representation of caregiving focuses on protection against physical threats rather than engaged care and authentic connection. Male caregivers were nearly two and a half times more likely than female caregivers to be shown as a “violent protector,” and the difference was statistically significant. By contrast, female caregivers and male caregivers were about equally likely to be depicted as the disciplinarian.

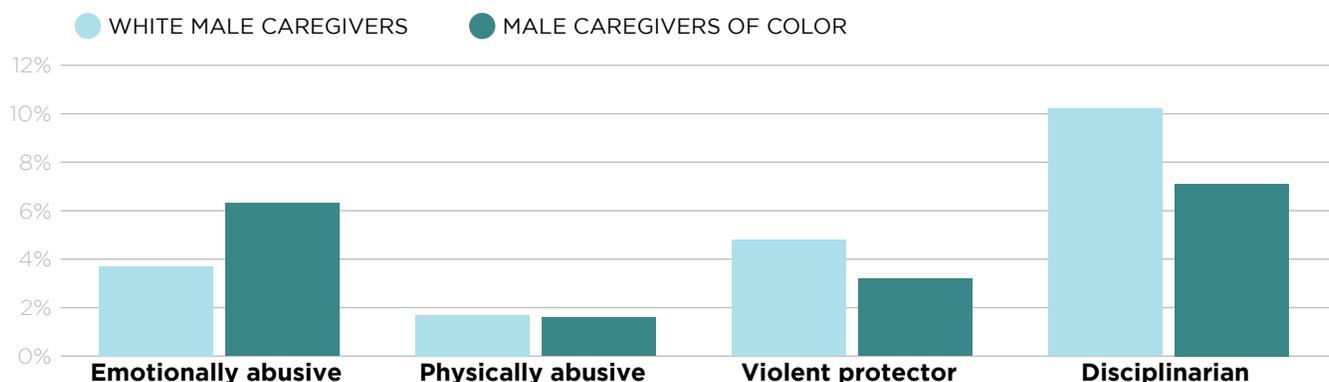
The “abusive dad” depiction of caregiving occurred at a similar rate for white male caregivers and male caregivers of color. Televised depictions of emotional abuse were more common for men of color (6.3%) than for white male caregivers (3.7%), but this difference is not statistically significant. Breaking out racial identities of people of color offers a little more insight into racialized depictions of abusive fathers.

Fathers identified as Asian or Pacific Islander (API) were significantly more likely to be portrayed as emotionally abusive, compared with fathers from other racial and ethnic groups. In total, 12.3% of API fathers were depicted as emotionally abusive, compared with 3.0% of fathers from all other racial groups. An example of this is a South Asian father chastising his son for being unmarried and

unsettled when the son is struggling to navigate online dating, or a father who shames his son for an imperfect score on a test at school. Existing studies find that portrayals of API caregivers are complex, and depictions often depend on factors related to immigration and generational status. The “model minority” myth — the false idea that Asian immigrants (especially East Asian and South Asian immigrants) excel in education and financially — overlaps conceptually with the “male breadwinner” model, with its high expectations around success at work and focus on upward economic mobility.⁴⁷ As a result, API fathers are often characterized in television as authoritarian and competitive, and these characterizations lack important context surrounding their parenting style and choices. At times, these traits drive a wedge between fathers and their (second- or third-generation) children, who perceive their fathers as strict and uncaring.⁴⁸ The “model minority” myth also shapes images of API motherhood, producing the “tiger mom” trope — a maternal figure characterized by critical,

CHART 9 • Racial differences for the “abusive dad” trope on popular TV shows

White men and men of color on popular TV shows embodied the “abusive dad” in similar and unique ways



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Percent reported is the share of male caregivers for each group that is shown displaying an element of the “abusive dad” trope. Analysis considers all 483 male caregiver characters in the top-fifteen scripted broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not yet fifteen scripted shows released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225.

often punitive, oversight and an unwillingness to settle for anything less than excellence. These cliché depictions paint communities with a broad brush that perpetuates negative stereotypes.

There were fewer instances of the “abusive dad” trope in more recent TV. Between two time periods — 2013–2016 and 2017–2020 — we saw fewer instances of emotional abuse among male caregivers (6.6% compared with 3.3%, respectively), fewer instances of physical abuse from male caregivers (3.3% compared with 1.1%), fewer instances of violent protectionism (4.7% compared with 4.0%), and fewer instance of disciplining (12.3% compared with 7.4%). While these differences are modest and fall short of statistical significance, they suggest a trend in representations of male caregivers away from abuse and other harsh means of caregiving.

APPRENTICE DADS

The “apprentice dad” trope concerns a male caregiver who is emotionally engaged and has good intentions but lacks competence in the domestic sphere. For instance, a well-meaning father who struggles to counsel his daughter through her first period would fall under the apprentice trope, as would a dad who doesn’t know what’s appropriate to pack in their kids’ lunch box. Often, apprentice

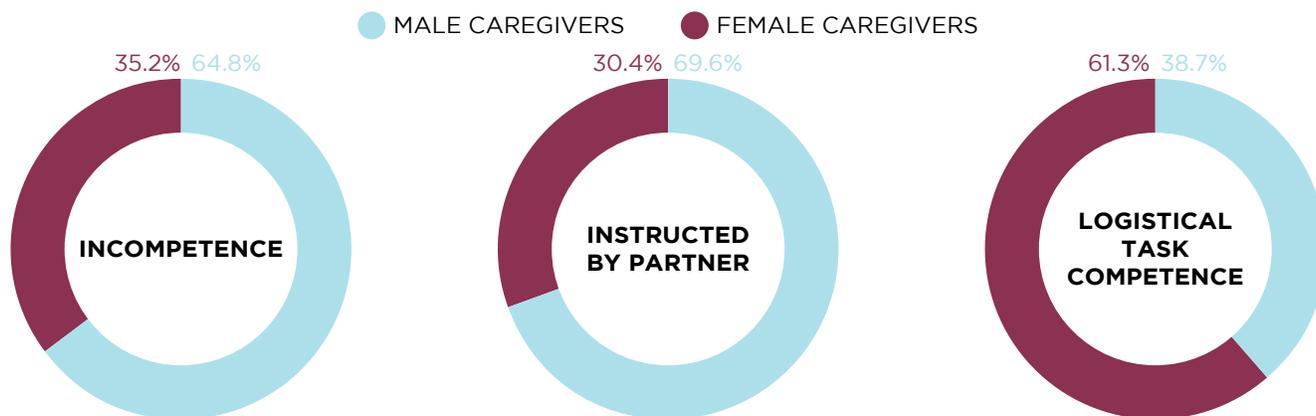
dads are thrust into a new frontier of caregiving by divorce or the death of their spouse, and struggle to navigate care on their own. A related representation, common in sitcoms⁴⁹ and sometimes referred to as the “bumbling dad” or “buffoon dad” tropes, portrays fathers as the repeated punchline of a joke.

Consistent with the “apprentice dad” trope, male caregivers on popular scripted TV shows were two times more likely than female caregivers to be portrayed as incompetent. Male caregivers were also two and a half times more likely than female caregivers to be depicted as following caregiving instructions from a co-parent or partner rather than making decisions and developing caregiving practices independently (this difference is not statistically significant). For instance, a scene in which a male caregiver needs extensive instructions on mealtimes, bedtimes, and acceptable television programs signals that these kinds of activities are a departure from their typical level of caregiving engagement.

Our analysis of caregiver depictions in this area also picked up on the traditionally gendered division of labor, signaling men and women have different spheres of caregiving competence. Female

CHART 10 • The “apprentice dad” on popular TV shows

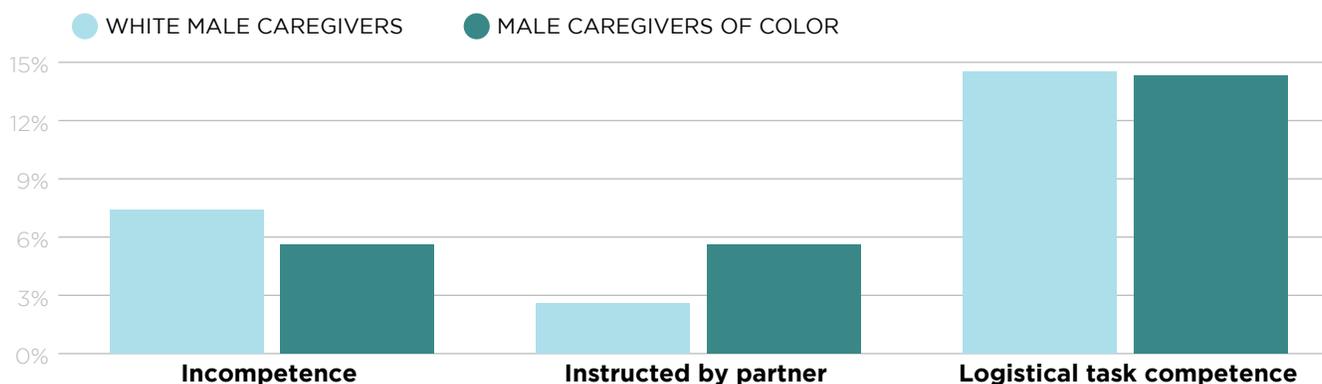
Male caregivers on popular TV shows were more likely than female caregivers to be shown as incompetent and less likely to be shown carrying out the logistics of caregiving



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media
 Analysis is of caregivers shown displaying an element of the “apprentice dad” trope. In total, 54 characters were shown as incompetent caregivers, 23 were instructed by their partners, and 181 were shown carrying out logistical tasks associated with caregiving.

CHART 11 • The “apprentice dad” on popular TV and racial differences

White men and men of color on popular TV shows embodied the “apprentice dad” in a similar fashion

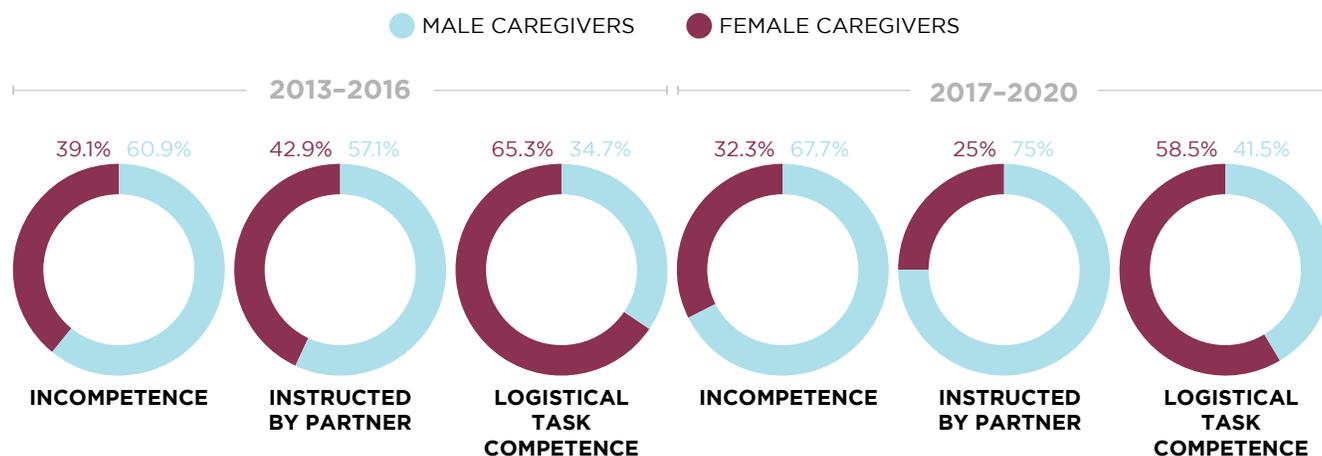


Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media
 Percent reported is the share of male caregivers for each group that is shown displaying an element of the “apprentice dad” trope. Analysis considers all 483 male caregiver characters in the top-fifteen broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not yet fifteen scripted shows released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225.

caregivers were about one and a half times more likely than male caregivers to be depicted doing household tasks associated with logistics — such as planning a birthday party or seeing the school counselor. But the apprentice dad was no more common for white male caregivers than for men of color who were caregivers (see Chart 11).

CHART 12 • The “apprentice dad” trope on popular TV shows, 2013–2020

There is little change in the “apprentice dad” trope and in gender differences on popular TV shows between the two time periods examined, 2013–2016 and 2017–2020



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media
 Analysis is of caregivers shown displaying an element of the “apprentice dad” trope. In total, 54 characters were shown as incompetent caregivers, 23 were instructed by their partners, and 181 were shown carrying out logistical tasks associated with caregiving.

Comparing “apprentice dad” representations in 2013–2016 to those in 2017–2020 reveals modest changes over time. A larger share of male caregivers were shown as incompetent and to be instructed by their partners, but in more recent years, they were depicted carrying out more logistical tasks (Chart 12).

“Personally, I feel disengaged and rarely watch shows [that show dads as foolish]. And it troubles me in terms of the influence it may be having on young men.”

BRIAN ANDERSON

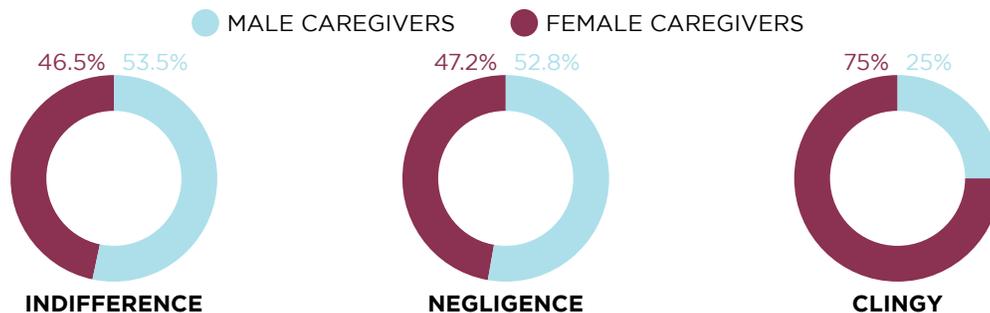
Executive Director, Fathering Together

ABSENTEE DADS

The “absentee dad” trope involves a male caregiver who shirks his parental responsibilities. Sometimes he abandons his children for selfish reasons; other times he’s portrayed as a workaholic who spends most of his time outside of the home, consistent with the traditional “male breadwinner” model of fatherhood. Absentee dads may also cave under the pressure of family problems they don’t feel equipped to cope with or manage. To evaluate the “absentee dad” trope, we considered whether caregivers were portrayed as “indifferent” or “negligent.” Such representations were relatively uncommon, and none of the differences between mothers and fathers on these criteria are statistically significant, with the exception of “clingy,” which is the inversion of absentee dad’s indifference. And female caregivers on popular scripted TV shows were three times as likely as male caregivers to be depicted as “clingy.” These representations were fairly stable over time for both female and male caregivers (see Chart 14).

CHART 13 • The “absentee dad” trope on popular TV shows

Male caregivers on popular TV shows were more likely to be depicted as indifferent or negligent — i.e., an absentee parent — and female caregivers on such shows were more likely to be shown as “clingy”

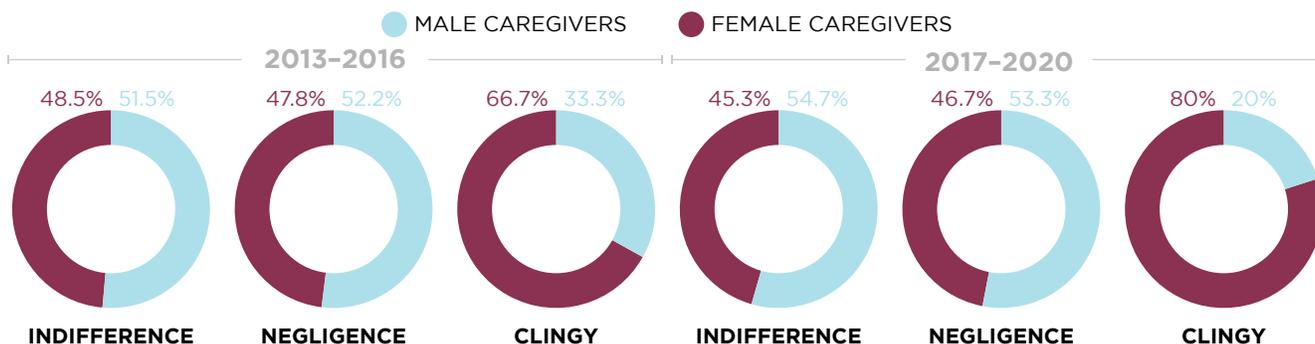


Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis is of caregivers shown displaying an element of the “absentee dad” trope. In total, 86 characters were shown as indifferent caregivers, 53 as negligent, and 40 as clingy.

CHART 14 • The “absentee dad” trope in popular TV shows, 2013–2020

Gender differences in the two time periods examined, 2013–2016 and 2017–2020



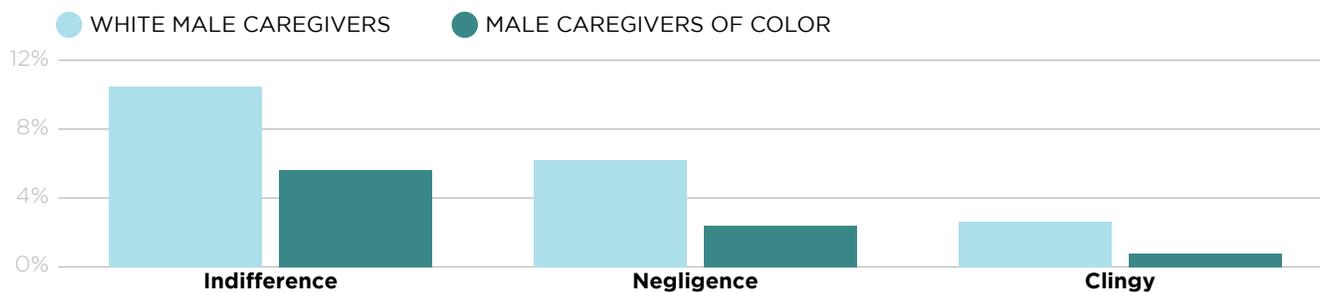
Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis is of caregivers shown displaying an element of the “absentee dad” trope. In total, 86 characters were shown as indifferent caregivers, 53 as negligent, and 40 as clingy.

There were racial disparities for “indifference” to caregiving, with white men and API men portrayed as indifferent at three times the rate of male caregivers from other racial and ethnic categories. About 10% of white and API male caregivers were depicted this way, compared with 3% of male caregivers from other racial groups. However, the differences between white men and men of color are not statistically significant.

CHART 15 • Racial differences in the “absentee dad” trope on popular TV shows

White male caregivers on popular TV shows were more likely to be shown as indifference and negligent than male caregivers of color on such shows, but the difference is not statistically significant



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Percent reported is the share of male caregivers for each group that is shown displaying an element of the “absentee dad” trope. Analysis considers all 483 male caregiver characters in the top-fifteen scripted broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not yet fifteen scripted shows released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225.



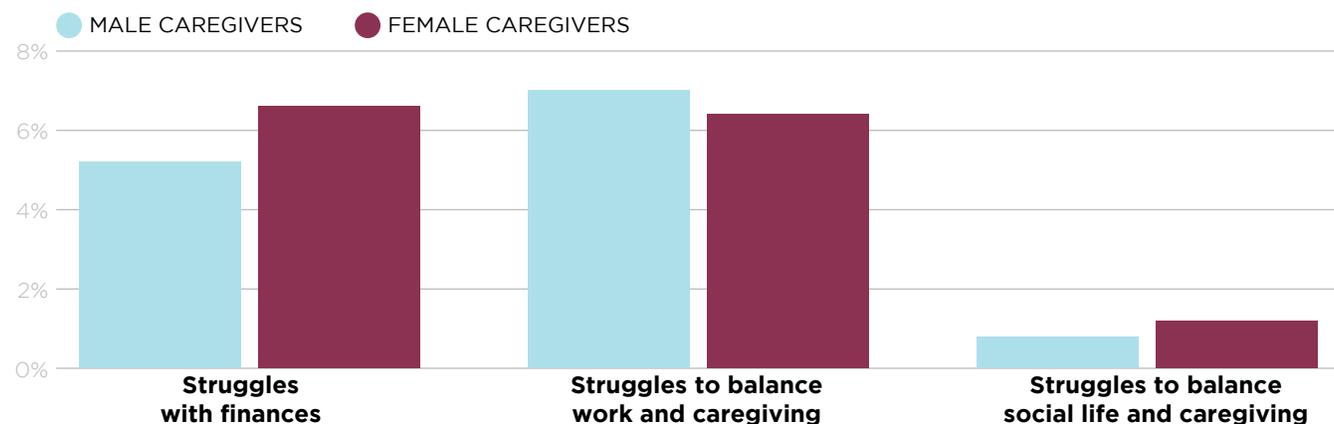
Westend61/The Westend61 Collection via Getty Images

Aches and Pains of Caregiving

Another category considered for this analysis is how often the real-world struggles that many caregivers face are depicted on popular television shows. The analysis looked at financial struggles as well as struggles to balance caregiving and work or caregiving and a social life. Caregivers who were shown encountering these struggles were rare, and there weren't differences between male and female caregivers, or between white male caregivers and male caregivers of color. And over the entire time period analyzed, there also doesn't appear to be a change in how often depictions of struggles were shown. These findings suggest that while there isn't gender or racial bias, there is an overall tendency to neglect caregiving struggles in television — and real caregivers surely notice this.

CHART 16 • Were the aches and pains of caregiving dramatized on popular TV shows?

Financial, social, and work struggles associated with caregiving were rarely shown on popular TV shows, but when they were, we found no significant gender differences

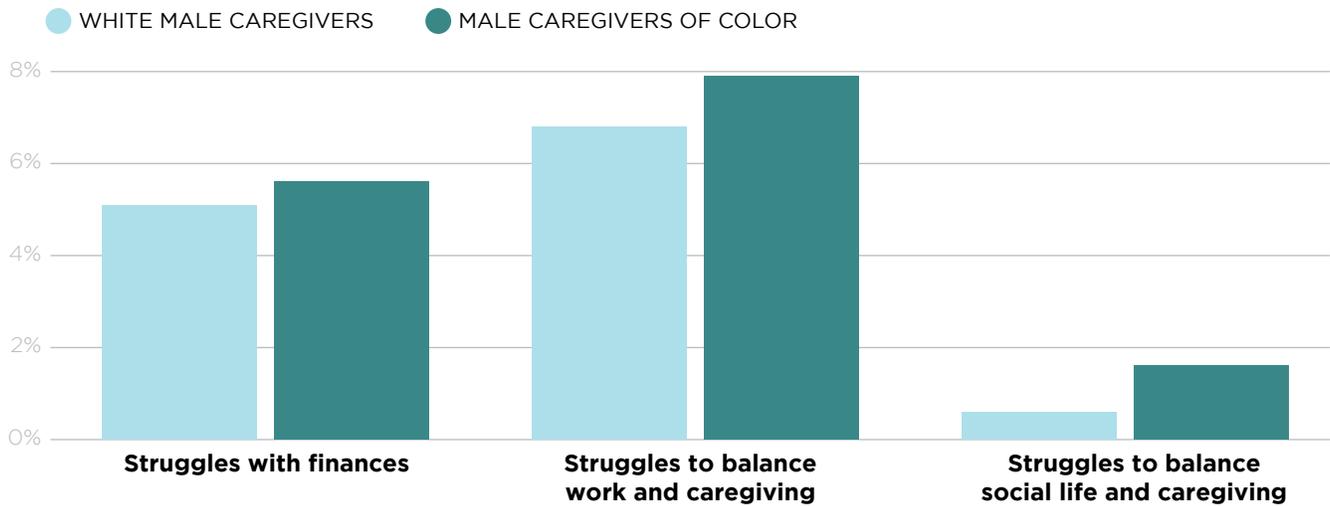


Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis is of all 995 caregiver characters in the top-fifteen scripted broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not fifteen scripted shows yet released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225.

CHART 17 • Were there racial differences in aches and pains of caregiving on popular TV shows?

Financial, social, and work struggles associated with caregiving were rarely shown on popular TV shows, but when they were, we find no significant differences between white men and men of color



Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Analysis is of all 483 male caregiver characters in the top-fifteen scripted broadcast television shows according to Nielsen ratings, and top-fifteen scripted streaming shows according to critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, per year. There were not yet fifteen scripted shows released on streaming platforms before 2015, so the total number of shows included in the analysis is 225.



Thanasis Zovoilis/Moment via Getty Images

Recommendations

Our analysis of nearly a decade of popular scripted television programs suggests that representations of male caregivers are often limited and stereotypical. In many ways, these depictions fail to reflect the realities that men face in caregiving roles. Because these representations contribute to gender socialization and communicate norms and expectations surrounding fatherhood, we encourage the industry to more fully develop the characterization of male caregivers in future programming. Offering more positive parenting role models would help to combat some of the pernicious myths of masculinity that distance men from caregiving, and would allow men to envision stronger and more authentic connections in their caregiving roles. Put differently: “If men can see it, they can be it.”

Several programs are already moving in this direction, offering gripping and nuanced characterizations of male caregivers. For instance, multigenerational family dramas like *This Is Us* show varied paths to fatherhood and diverse caregiving arrangements. Male caregivers aren’t idealized in these roles; rather, they grapple with the challenges and failures in ways that are genuine, evoke empathy, and illustrate paths to personal growth. Key plot points in the show include the family patriarch, Jack, overcoming alcoholism and learning to better cope with the pressures of fatherhood; Miguel working through a chilly relationship with Jack’s adult children after marrying their mother, Rebecca; William and his son Randall struggling to forge a relationship after William gave Randall up at birth; Randall establishing a secure and loving relationship with his adopted daughter, Deja; Toby grappling with his son’s disability, his own mental health, and the economic pressures of being a working parent; and Kevin navigating a complicated co-parenting relationship after an unplanned pregnancy. Over the course of the series, relationships are formed, stress-tested, and sometimes dissolved — and caregiving is navigated across these changes. We think these examples offer a solid foundation on which future programming can build.

Based on our analysis, we offer the following six recommendations when developing roles for male caregivers in future programming:

#1 Break Down Gender Stereotypes Around Housework

Move beyond one-dimensional portrayals of male caregivers that emphasize their unsuitability for parenting. Show men who are emotionally present and invested in relationships as they engage in care work. Highlight the benefits of care work for men in terms of well-being, social-emotional connection, and sense of purpose. Attribute stereotypically feminized traits associated with care work to male characters; understand that male characters can embody a balanced mix of personal traits.

#2 Disrupt the Male-Breadwinner Model

Show effective co-parenting and networks or communities of care. Dual-income families are the norm nowadays,⁵⁰ but representations of co-parenting were relatively rare in the programs we analyzed. Instead, women were responsible for more of the “daily grind” type of caregiving activities. Beyond this, many of the well-intended but bumbling “apprentice dads” we identified were divorced or widowed, suggesting the only reason men might take on an expanded range of care work is because they are forced into it out of necessity. Future programming can add realism to caregiving roles by grappling more fully with co-parenting — both among committed partners and separated partners.

#3 Help Male Caregivers Up When They Get Knocked Down, Again

Depict the real challenges of caregiving. Show male caregivers encountering obstacles, experiencing setbacks, and failing to live up to the ideals of caregiving. Model resilience, vulnerability, and paths forward, thereby combating expectations that men present themselves always as strong, confident, and infallible — expectations that stem from unhealthy masculinity. Normalize the parental learning curve. Rather than leaning into tired tropes of isolated “apprentice dads” or heroic, go-it-alone fathers, show male caregivers productively engaging their psychosocial support networks in times of need.

#4 Model Male Accountability

Contextualize abusive or absentee caregivers and their consequences. Consider demonstrating the process of setting and enforcing healthy boundaries in difficult caregiving relationships. Avoid storylines with simplistic reconciliation narratives wherein family members are forgiven simply because “family is family,” without much effort on the part of the abusive or absentee caregiver to change their behavior, seek therapy, or acknowledge the harm done.

#5 Diversify Male Caregivers

Our analysis points to some differences in representations of male characters across racial and ethnic groups, some of which are favorable and some of which are less so (e.g., unsympathetic authoritarian Asian fathers). As noted prior, male caregivers of color have historically been portrayed in a more negative light than white male caregivers, although this is changing. Care should be taken to avoid negative, racially stereotyped depictions of caregiving, and to instead conceptualize caregiving through an intersectional lens. Working-class caregivers also tend to be portrayed in a negative light — as less engaged and emotionally unavailable — meaning there’s room for improvement here as well.

#6 Embrace More Storytelling About Care and Caregiving

Tell more stories that draw inspiration from the ups and downs of real life caregiving. Audiences respond positively to complex stories of caregiving. Telling stories about people who are in the complicated business of caring and caregiving reflect that reality, and television plays a key role in affirming how central caregiving is in our lives. COVID-19 and its attendant economic and social upheaval have highlighted caregiving’s centrality in society — for the elderly, for those households that lost family members, for households that lost work, for low-income households, and for the households that have always struggled to have childcare. Good, engaging stories can be found in these struggles. Indeed, these are human stories that affect us all.

BROADER IMPACTS

Shifting media representations and public understanding of caregiving roles for men will surely have broader social impacts. More positive or nuanced representations of male caregiving can alter cultural norms and expectations around how families navigate care responsibilities and promote healthy co-parenting. Establishing a culture of care and equality in caregiving between men and women are important factors in increasing women's representation in the workplace and supporting women's professional success.⁵¹ For example, research on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the household division of labor suggests that additional care responsibilities stemming from school and childcare closures fell disproportionately on women.⁵² However, in families with greater co-paternal involvement in childcare, women fared better in the workplace. Women who reported doing most or all of the childcare work in their home had about a 50% chance of dropping out of the workforce, compared with about 15% for women in homes where childcare duties were evenly divided between partners.⁵³ This example highlights the importance of co-parenting and shared caregiving for healthy and successful families.

Increased attention on male caregiving can also influence public policy, both by shaping policy makers' perspectives on the needs and experiences of American families and by sparking public demand for family policy that supports expanded caregiving roles for men. For instance, male caregivers would benefit from greater availability of paternity leave, particularly paid leave; it can help them establish an early bond with their children and support their partners at a critical stage in child development.⁵⁴ Research suggests family policy often overlooks low-income fathers in particular, making this group an important intervention point for family-policy advocates.⁵⁵ Increased public attention to care work might also catalyze support for policies directed at the rising and often unmanageable costs of childcare.⁵⁶ In these respects, there's a lot at stake in improving the quality and realism of representations of male caregivers in entertainment media. For more information about structural solutions aimed at supporting care work, see Promundo's [State of the World's Fathers](#).

Pitfalls in Representing Male Caregivers:

Think Twice about These Common Tropes and Stereotypes

Stories about male caregivers often rely on one-dimensional tropes and/or stereotypes about gender and race. We offer a checklist to identify representation pitfalls that rely on negative stereotypes about men as caregivers in film and television:

THE APPRENTICE DAD

The “apprentice dad” is portrayed as a fish out of water when it comes to parenting. This type of dad is often presented in comedic terms that highlight how men struggle when they operate outside of their “normal sphere” and take on more caregiving responsibilities. In this study, male caregivers were two times more likely than female caregivers to be depicted as following caregiving instructions given by a co-parent or partner, and nearly two times as likely to be portrayed as incompetent.

Does this film/episode include the “apprentice dad” trope?

- A male caregiver is incompetent at simple tasks, or must be instructed by his partner to carry out basic caregiving tasks, and that incompetence or instruction is the punchline of a joke.
- A male caregiver provides care only out of necessity, due to the death of their partner or an acrimonious divorce.

THE ABUSIVE DAD

The “abusive dad” is portrayed as aggressive, violent, punitive, and sometimes sexually deviant – often an extreme manifestation of unhealthy masculine traits. This trope is typically used to highlight the danger that men can pose to children. In this study, we found that although abuse was uncommon in depictions of male caregivers, they were four times more likely than female caregivers to be physically abusive.

Does this film/episode include the “abusive dad” trope?

- A male caregiver is emotionally abusive or physically abusive, and
- the trauma inflicted by the abuse is unacknowledged, ignored, or rationalized by other adult characters; other adult characters gaslight the abused party, or
- the behavior of the abusive figure is justified or superficially exonerated, and the abused party offers forgiveness without much effort on the part of the abuser to change their behavior, seek therapy, or acknowledge the harm done, or
- the abuser’s backstory of abuse is used to justify their current abusive behavior, without acknowledgment of the intergenerational trauma dynamics at work.

THE ABSENTEE DAD

The “absentee dad” is portrayed as abdicating fatherhood altogether. Sometimes he abandons his children for selfish reasons; other times he’s portrayed as a workaholic who spends most of his time outside of the home. A story is less likely to explain the absence of a dad than the absence of a mom because negligence is more incongruent with notions of motherhood than notions of fatherhood. In many stories, the absence of a father figure fuels a young characters’ heroic actions, because they have no adult supervision.

Does this film/episode include the “absentee dad” trope?

- A male caregiver ignores or is uninterested in the care receiver,
- because of work responsibilities, or to escape caregiving to pursue his own dreams, or
- for reasons left unexplained.

VIOLENT PROTECTOR

The “violent protector” portrays a male caregiver who focuses on protecting his family against physical threats, rather than a male caregiver engaged in care and authentic connection. They threaten or enact unwarranted violence in an attempt to “protect” the people for whom they care – for example, a father who brings out his shotgun when his daughter’s date picks her up.

Does this film/episode include the “violent protector” trope?

- A male caregiver threatens violence to protect someone in a paternalistic nature, without cause, or
- by creating the situation through their own actions, or
- views all strangers as threats to those they must protect.

THE MAN-BOX DAD

The “man-box dad” is portrayed to act in ways that reinforce a rigid mentality about what it means to be a man. This trope serves as a hypermasculine model of what a male caregiver should look like and what is acceptable.

Does this film/episode include the “man-box dad”?

- A male caregiver is self-sufficient and unwilling to rely on others;
- acts tough;
- is physically attractive without effort;
- adheres to rigid masculine gender roles (especially with housework and chores);
- is intolerant of LGBTQIA+ identities;
- is hypersexual;
- and is overly controlling (especially over his household and the women in his life).

“This Is Us?”: By The Numbers

These indices compare statistics about parent characteristics to representations of parenthood in popular scripted TV programs between 2013 and 2020. For details about the analysis, see the [full report](#).

Percentage of fathers experiencing work-life conflict in 1977: 35

[Source: Families and Work Institute](#)

Percentage of fathers experiencing work-life conflict in 2008: 60

[Source: Families and Work Institute](#)

Percentage of male caregivers on popular scripted TV shows shown struggling to balance work and caregiving responsibilities: <1

[Source: This Is Us?](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Authentic portrayals of male caregivers should include the challenges of balancing work and caregiving. At the root of this conflict is a desire to spend more time engaged in care work. According to Pew Research Center's 2013 study on fatherhood in the United States, fathers are less satisfied than mothers with the amount of time they routinely spend with their children.

Hours per week fathers spent doing household chores in 1965: 4

[Source: Pew Research Center](#)

Hours per week fathers spent doing household chores in 2011: 10

[Source: Pew Research Center](#)

Share of all household chores on popular scripted TV shows carried out by men: 31

[Source: This Is Us?](#)

Share of all household chores on popular scripted TV shows carried out by women: 69

[Source: This Is Us?](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Fathers and male caregivers can work toward a more equitable distribution of household labor. Studies show that more egalitarian distributions of household labor between parents impact the choices children make later in life — e.g., increasing the likelihood that female children select nonstereotypical courses of study and occupations.

Percentage of American children with an incarcerated parent in 2017: 7

Source: National Institute of Corrections

Percentage of popular scripted TV shows featuring an incarcerated parent: 2

Source: This Is Us?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Parents who are incarcerated can maintain healthy relationships with their children. Not only would modeling these relationships increase representation for a largely overlooked group, but studies show that participation in skills-based parenting programs may decrease recidivism. Also, consider the discriminatory patterns of incarceration. For example, according to the Economy Policy Institute, one-third of imprisoned fathers of Black children committed property crimes or technical violations, such as failure to show up for a court date or an appointment with a probation officer, failure to meet other conditions of release (e.g., steady employment), or failure to pay traffic tickets or similar fines.

Percentage of Americans who say it is “extremely important” for fathers to provide emotional support for their children: 52

Source: Pew Research Center

Share of emotional connection during care work shown by men on popular scripted TV shows: 41

Source: This Is Us?

Share of emotional connection during care work shown by women on popular scripted TV shows: 59

Source: This Is Us?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Ninety-three percent of American fathers say they talk with their child about their day at least several times a week, according to a 2011 study by the Pew Research Center. Show fathers taking part in their children's day-to-day lives and establishing an emotional connection with them.

Percentage of families living in poverty in the U.S. in 2020: 11.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Percentage of caregivers living in poverty on popular scripted TV shows: <1

Source: This Is Us?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In 2020, eleven million children lived in poverty in the United States. Earlier estimates suggest about two and a half million of these children are homeless. Bring attention to the root causes of these issues and the policy infrastructure designed to address them. Include the importance of food assistance programs, housing support, school funding, and health care programs for struggling families.

Percentage of children with at least one immigrant parent in the U.S. in 2017: 25

Source: The Urban Institute

Percentage of caregivers that were immigrants on popular scripted TV shows: <1

Source: This Is Us?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

A majority of Americans (68 percent) view openness to people from other countries as a defining characteristic of the United States. Showing immigrant families is a powerful way to humanize historically marginalized groups and to diminish the conceptualization of foreign people as the "other."

Percentage of of LGBT adults who are parents: 35

Source: Pew Research Center

Percentage of caregivers identified as LGBTQIA+ on popular scripted TV shows: 4

Source: This Is Us?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

According to a 2019 poll from Pew Research Center, a majority of Americans (61 percent) support same-sex marriage. Including same-sex couples and diverse LGBTQIA+ families in programming normalizes for viewers a growing demographic of caregivers.

Appendix

Types of care tasks shown among caregivers on popular TV shows:

	DESCRIPTION	PERCENTAGE OF CAREGIVERS
Emotional Care	Providing emotional support for the care receiver, such as listening to their problems, consoling, calming, or giving advice.	29.0%
Feminine Work	Domestic tasks traditionally associated with feminine gender roles, such as cooking, laundry, or cleaning.	11.7%
Masculine Work	Domestic tasks traditionally associated with masculine gender roles, such as handiwork, car maintenance, or grilling.	2.8%
Transportation	Providing transportation for the care receiver.	8.5%
Logistical Tasks	Handling the logistical tasks associated with caregiving, such as managing a schedule, planning a birthday party, or making a doctor's appointment.	18.2%
Play	Having fun with the care receiver.	16.6%
Discipline	Reprimanding, punishing, or enforcing rules.	9.9%
Physical Care	Managing the care receiver's physical needs, such as feeding someone who cannot feed themselves, changing diapers, or carrying a baby.	7.3%

Types of care behaviors displayed by caregivers on popular TV shows:

	DESCRIPTION	PERCENTAGE OF CAREGIVERS
Instructed	The caregiver needs to be reminded or told how to do simple caregiving tasks.	2.3%
Affectionate	The caregiver shows physical affection to the care receiver, such as hugging, or verbal expressions of love.	41.5%
Supportive	The caregiver shows outward support for the caregiver's choices, accomplishments, goals, or behaviors.	37.1%
Clingy	The caregiver is overbearing to the care receiver, to the care receiver's detriment, such as not letting them go out with their friends because they don't want to be left alone.	4.0%
Indifferent	The caregiver ignores the care receiver, but not in a way that creates obvious harm, such as a parent attending a soccer game but then reading a book rather than paying attention.	8.6%
Incompetent	The caregiver makes obvious mistakes linked to not knowing how to care for the receiver adequately, such as not knowing basic information about the care receiver's life or household routines.	5.4%

Harmful behaviors by caregivers on popular TV shows:

	DESCRIPTION	PERCENTAGE OF CAREGIVERS
Emotional Abuse	The caregiver manipulates, belittles, gaslights, or humiliates the care receiver.	3.9%
Physical Abuse	The caregiver physically harms the care receiver.	1.3%
Violent Protector	The caregiver threatens or enacts unwarranted violence in an attempt to "protect" the care receiver, such as a father threatening to harm a daughter's date.	3.0%
Neglect	The caregiver does not meet the care receiver's basic needs.	5.3%

Obstacles caregivers may face on popular TV shows:

	DESCRIPTION	PERCENTAGE OF CAREGIVERS
Struggling to Balance Care and Finances	Experiences difficulty handling the financial responsibilities of care work.	5.9%
Struggling to Balance Care and Work	The caregiver finds it difficult to manage the demands of both care work and their job.	6.7%
Struggling to Balance Care and a Social Life	The caregiver finds it difficult to maintain a social life because of the responsibilities and obligations of care work.	1.0%

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39. For gender and sexual orientation, we defaulted to cisgender and straight when provided with no further information. For gay, lesbian, or queer identification, we used information such as romantic and sexual attraction and behaviors, pronouns, clothing and hairstyles, affectations, decor choices, and many other cues. Without explicit confirmation, no single trait was enough to categorize a character on its own (e.g., no character is going to be coded as nonbinary solely because they have an androgenous style). However, when several contextual clues were present, a character was initially designated as "likely LGBTQIA+" and was then be reviewed by another researcher to confirm that the available cues were sufficient.
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ABOUT THE GEENA DAVIS INSTITUTE ON GENDER IN MEDIA

Founded in 2004 by Academy Award Winning Actor Geena Davis, the Institute is the only research-based organization working collaboratively within the entertainment industry to create gender balance, foster inclusion and reduce negative stereotyping in family entertainment media.

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ABOUT EQUIMUNDO: CENTER FOR MASCULINITIES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Equimundo works to achieve gender equality and social justice by transforming intergenerational patterns of harm and promoting patterns of care, empathy and accountability among boys and men throughout their lives. Equimundo has worked internationally and in the US since 2011 to engage men and boys as allies in gender equality, promote healthy manhood, and prevent violence. Previously called Promundo-US, the organization's work was born out of community-based and evidence-based work to engage men and boys in gender equality and nonviolent manhood in numerous settings in Latin America, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and North America.

Learn more about Equimundo by
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