TIP SHEETS FOR CONTENT CREATORS

Writing with care about men and boys, family and caregiving

Featuring tips and
resources written
and curated by

equimundo

Alongside partners including

NEW AMERICA

Geena Davis Institute
on Gender in Media

CARING ACROSS GENERATIONS

WHO CARES ABOUT CAREGIVERS?

Writing with care about work, family and caregiving

STATE OF PLAY

Today, 53 million unpaid family caregivers in America provide physical or emotional care or support to older adults and disabled loved ones at home. Most of America's 74 million children grow up in homes where all adults work. Caregiving is a universal part of life but largely invisible and undervalued in our culture and policies.

The lack of universal access to child care, paid leave, and aging and disability care in the U.S. forces people out of jobs, harming individual families, communities, and the entire U.S. economy. The devaluing of care has a greater impact on the lives, health, and work of women, disabled people, and older adults, and it disproportionately harms people and communities of color and low-wage earners.

While care is largely seen as a "women's issue," men's caregiving has increased over time in U.S. households: Fathers provide more hands-on care to children than ever before, and men make up more than 40% of the primary caregivers of disabled or aging loved ones, yet men's caregiving is diminished by cultural stereotypes and expectations.

WHY ON-SCREEN REPRESENTATION MATTERS

When caregiving remains invisible and gendered in outdated ways we all pay a price. Because representations on screen contribute to gender socialization and communicate norms and expectations, storytellers have the power to bring caregiving to the forefront of pop culture in realistic, relatable ways.

Authentic and nuanced stories that normalize care as part of life reduce stigma for those who give and receive it, and are an important component of inclusive storytelling.

Establishing a culture of care and equity in caregiving are important factors in increasing diverse representation in the workplace and ensuring that all people can thrive at work, care for their loved ones, and achieve economic security and opportunity.

TROPES TO AVOID

"Apprentice Dads" who are bumbling and need direction & **"Superhero Moms"** who do it all reinforce gendered assumptions about caregiver competency.

"Butt of the Joke" depictions of older adults & a **"Burden Mentality"** ethos in depictions of people with disabilities diminish the humanity and agency of those who rely on care.

"Criminal Caregivers" who take advantage of their clients & **"Bombshell Babysitters"** who provide child care but are only on screen for comedic relief or objectification undermine the skill and professionalism of care work.

"Worker with an Invisible Family" who hides their family or personal care needs at work & the **"Guilty Worker"** who apologizes at work for having personal care needs or family responsibilities at home, both of which reinforce cultural biases, stigma, and shame.

APPLYING THE CARE LENS

CARE
Is someone in the story a parent, child, grandparent, disabled, 65+, experiencing or recovering from serious illness or injury, or a major procedure? Does someone have older parents? Consider how care would organically occur in their day-to-day lives: what actions could be made visible on screen, and how could the integration of care add to the characters' stakes and/or deepen the interpersonal dynamics at play?

IDENTITY
When showing care, who is providing it? Who is receiving it? Does the depiction reinforce or disrupt traditional gender norms and stereotypes? How could the depiction account for all the intersections of the person's identity and how they relate to care as well as their emotional drive?

WORK
Does a character work while also providing or receiving care, or managing care for themselves? Are their care responsibilities hidden or visible? Does the character have a supportive workplace? Would this worker have paid leave, or flexible hours, sick time, or access to childcare, given their role and socioeconomic status, or state/local laws? Have they faced (or internalized) bias or suffered discrimination, including losing a job? Can they or another character question this or call it out, if so?

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES: MAKING CARE VISIBLE

AGE

A Million Little Things explored aging and dementia care through the context of the father-son relationship between Walter and Rome. The conversations and decisions that happened around the best path for Walter's care deepened the expression of their ongoing relationship. The storyline also illustrated that, while Rome acted as the primary caregiver, Walter was surrounded by a circle of support, including family, friends, and, briefly, a professional care worker.

PARENTING

Grey's Anatomy has made parenting, and often equal parenting, visible over many seasons. Both male and female characters have taken and talked about parental leave; doctors have talked about other characters taking paid leave; parents of all genders drop children off at childcare. Patients are shown making arrangements at their workplaces when they are going to be out. The show has named child care as an intervention that makes it possible for parents to work.

DISABILITY

As We See It centered three autistic young adult roommates navigating the ups and downs of life, work, and romance, with the support of a professional care worker and their families. The story also featured a nuanced depiction of a sibling caregiving relationship and a disabled character providing care to his father when illness emerged.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PORTRAYING MALE CAREGIVERS

Action steps for content creators

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."

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.

DISRUPT THE MALE-BREADWINNER MODEL

Show effective co-parenting and networks or communities of care. Dual-income families are the norm nowadays, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Your script might include this trope if:

- 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.

Your script might include this trope if:

- A male caregiver is emotionally abusive or physically abusive.

- The trauma inflicted by the abusive male caregiver is unacknowledged, ignored, or rationalized by other adult characters, or other adult characters gaslight the abused party.

- 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.

- 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.

Your script might include this trope if:

- 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.

Your script might include this trope if:

- 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.

Your script might include this trope if:

- 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/or is overly controlling (especially over his household and the women in his life).

BREAKING FREE FROM BOYHOOD STEREOTYPES:

Action Steps for Content Creators to improve healthy representations of men and boys on screen

Boys receive and absorb harmful stereotypical messages about what it takes to "be a man" from an early age. Boys who embrace harmful stereotypes may be less likely to have close, emotionally connected relationships and more likely to have poorer mental health and to use violence later in life.

We all have a role to play in creating a gender equal, nonviolent future. We need content creators to join us in challenging stereotypes by portraying vulnerability, connection, and respectful relationships, on screen.

COMMIT TO INCLUSIVE STORYTELLING THAT REFLECTS THE BROADER POPULATION.

Review how identities represented on screen (gender identities, races, sexual orientations, ability status, ages, and body sizes) match up to the broader population. Make sure that characters are not tokenized or stereotyped based on their identities.

AVOID STEREOTYPES ABOUT MEN AND PARENTING, AND ABOUT BOYS AND CHORES.

Allow male characters to be primary care providers who are competent and involved in the day-to-day lives of children: packing school lunches, driving kids to school, etc. Show male characters of all ages taking on chores, like cooking and cleaning.

ALLOW MALE CHARACTERS TO EXPRESS A FULL RANGE OF EMOTIONS -- INCLUDING LOVE.

Show male characters that model close friendships, family relationships, and healthy expressions of emotions. Show boys in a variety of healthy romantic relationships. Avoid using vulnerable emotions (e.g., sadness, fear) as a catalyst for destructive behavior.

SHOW BOYS AND YOUNG MEN ASKING FOR HELP, PARTICULARLY FROM PARENTS.

Avoid depicting boys and men as solitary or as having to "go at it alone." Allow male characters to maintain social and familial relationships and to seek support from others.

PORTRAY POSITIVE EXAMPLES OF MALE FRIENDSHIP.

Provide opportunities for male friendships to model sharing emotions and supporting each other, as well as calling out peers for bullying or violent behavior, rather than portraying men as bystanders.

SHOW BOYS AND GIRLS PLAYING TOGETHER.

Boys who have positive, female friendships are building relationships based on respect from an early age. Show boys playing with typical female toys (e.g., dolls) and girls playing with typical male toys (e.g., trucks), preferably in the same narrative.

AVOID GRATUITOUS VIOLENCE.

Avoid using vulnerable emotions-like sadness and fear-as a catalyst for destructive behavior. Allow male characters to resolve conflict in non-violent ways. This shift is particularly needed for male characters of color, who are less likely to be shown expressing an emotion other than anger, perpetuating a harmful racial stereotype.

SHOW MORE NUANCED BOY CHARACTERS AND NOT JUST STOCK TYPES.

The majority of male characters in kids' TV are smart and active, funny losers (dumb jock or hapless dad), and geeks. Broaden the representation of male characters.

USE SPELLCHECK FOR BIAS.

At the script stage to uncover unconscious gender, racial, sexual orientation, ability, age, and body size bias. This automated text analysis tool provides concrete feedback for immediate improvement. It is especially important to analyze scripts prior green lighting to make sure that the cast is gender and race balanced in terms of the number of characters, the prominence of the characters, and character speaking time.

USE THE GD-IQ.

Later in the production process to evaluate representations of gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, age, and size in video content. This automated tool provides precise data on presence, prominence, screen time, and speaking time that editors can use to improve the final version of their film, TV episode, TV series, ad, or other media content.

> "We can make changes in culture that shift us away from seeing care through an individual lens and toward shared problem-solving and public solutions.
>
> Specific interventions—large and small—in film and TV stories can help lead us to a world where we can all manage our professional and personal lives with dignity, opportunity and inclusion for all people and families."

FURTHER READING

Breaking Free from Stereotypes: Tips for Content Creators

https://www.equimundo.org/resources/breaking-free-from-boyhood-stereotypes-action-steps-for-parents-and-content-creators/

This Is US? How TV Does and Doesn't Get Men's Caregiving

https://www.equimundo.org/resources/this-is-us-how-tv-does-and-doesnt-get-mens-caregiving/

If He Can See It, Will He Be It? Representations of Masculinity in Boys' Television

https://www.equimundo.org/resources/if-he-can-see-it-will-he-be-it-representations-of-masculinity-in-boys-television/

Learn more about us at **equimundo.org.**

equimundo