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## Let's Retire the Trope of the Hapless Dad

By **David James Poissant**  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, September 19, 2018



Writer David James Poissant on an outing with one of his daughters.

Welcome to the winter of 2010. That's me in the boots and puffy jacket because this is Cincinnati and it's February and there's snow on the ground. I'm a full-time grad student, teaching assistant, and writer. During the day, my wife works. When she comes home, I write. I teach at night. I would write during the day, but I already have a day job. I'm a stay-at-home dad.

We're at the post office, the one with the broken door that my double stroller won't fit through. My six-month-old twin daughters are asleep. I tuck one daughter into an umbrella stroller and carry the other in one arm. I balance my packages in the other arm and head inside. The line is long, but if the girls stay asleep, all will be well.

And all is well until I feel a tug. Reflexively, I drop my mail and grab my child with both hands. A stranger glares at me. As my daughter wakes and cries, the stranger's face softens. "I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't want her to get cold." I'm bewildered until she explains that my daughter's pant leg had ridden up, an inch of skin exposed to the cold air. The stranger tried to pull it down, but tugged too hard. "It's okay," she says. "I'm a mother."

"It's not okay," I want to say. "I don't know you. Don't touch my kid."

But I don't say it. I've given up fighting. Everywhere I go, I get unsolicited advice, correction, instruction framed as concern. Much of it is well-intentioned, though much of it is wrong. One stranger insisted that babies should sleep on their stomachs. When I explained that the rate of sudden infant death syndrome plummeted when parents started sleeping babies on their backs, the scolder assured me that her kids slept on their stomachs and they turned out OK.

Even good advice often comes from a place of assumption, the assumption being that, as a dude, I'm too dumb to care for my kids. One librarian, scanning a DVD for me, encouraged me to read more to my children and to avoid TV at their age. "I read to my kids every day," I wanted to say. "They've never seen TV, and this, the 4<sup>th</sup> season of *The Wire*? This is not for them."

A mother asked how I liked being a "manny," as though the only explanation for a man alone with two babies on a weekday was that he must be getting paid.

In *Manhood for Amateurs*, Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Chabon says, "The handy thing about being a father is that the historic standard is so pitifully low." Most fathers I talk to—smart, kind, attentive dads—grapple with such lowered expectations. At Starbucks, a mother asked how I liked being a "manny" (a male nanny), as though the only explanation for a man alone with two babies on a weekday was that he must be getting paid. "I'm their father," I said. She hadn't meant anything by it, she assured me. She'd seen it on TV.

Our worldview, of course, is shaped just this way. What began as an inversion of the idealized 1950s TV dad (admittedly problematic in its own right), the trope of the bumbling father has become a staple of movie and television comedy. Dad can't cook. Dad can't change diapers. Dad can't clean up a mess without making it worse. (See: *Everybody Loves Raymond*. As in, almost every episode.)

Even in 2018, the trope persists. In season two of Netflix series *Atypical*, mom leaves for a few weeks, and the kids are forced to eat pizza almost every night. Keeping up with laundry proves insurmountable, until mom comes to the rescue with lavender oil for the shirts and homemade meals for the freezer.

You might argue that such televised fare is mostly harmless. But, deal with enough strangers questioning your parenting abilities or touching your baby, and I promise you'll lose patience with the stereotype.

Now, let me be clear. I'm not saying that it's hard to be a man. I'm not saying that dads have it worse than moms. (Moms face a whole host of biases that other writers have addressed far better than I could here.) Most of all, I'm not saying that the portrayal of fathers on TV even begins to approach the problematic portrayal of America's most vulnerable groups and marginalized communities.

But, make no mistake: When we badmouth dads, we aim our scorn at those communities too. Gay fathers, trans fathers, and men of color, already oppressed, need not be told that something in their gender identity makes them incapable of excellent parenting.

Also, lest this come off as a whiny "Male Tears" or #NotAllMen argument, please know that I loathe the trope of the hapless dad, in large part, because of what it says about women. When we buy into the notion that dads can't care for children, we buy into the idea that parenting and domesticity are women's roles. When we say that father figures can't cook without burning the pancakes or iron without burning the clothes, we say that mother figures belong beside those stoves and ironing boards. When we laugh and assume that dads can't get the job done, what choice do we leave mothers but to assume restrictive roles they have every right to resist?

Father may not know best, but he knows a thing or two, so let's raise the bar for him, in real life and in the movies and TV shows we love.

And where does the hapless dad equation leave genderqueer and nonbinary individuals? When we say that dads act one way and mothers another, aren't we reinforcing the very gender norms we've been seeking to dismantle in this country for decades?

To be fair, in the years since my daughters were infants, attitudes have shifted. Perhaps dads today face fewer preconceived notions. Certainly, their portrayal onscreen, with some notable exceptions, is getting better. Take this summer's sleeper hit *Eighth Grade*, for example. I can't think of a father in American cinema rendered with more empathy than actor Josh Hamilton's character Mark Day. Here's a guy who cooks healthy dinners and keeps a tidy house. He's imperfect, but he loves his daughter, and he balances work life and domestic life without neglecting her. He's not a man merely getting by. He's doing a great job, the way countless single parents do.

We need more movies like this, and we'll get more as entertainment races to catch up with the real world. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2016, of the over 70 million fathers in America, only 209,000 are stay-at-home dads with working partners. And, only 17 percent of single parents identify as men. But those numbers are on the rise. As they grow, so too will our understanding of fathers and our demand for depictions that transcend the hapless dad trope.

Father may not know best, but he knows a thing or two, so let's raise the bar for him, in real life and in the movies and TV shows we love.

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