The Doofus Dad stereotype has always been around, with characters such as Fred Flintstone, Dagwood Bumstead and even Charlie Brown's monotone parents. But the consistency of these new portrayals in shows like “Jimmy Neutron” has slowly created a new norm opposed to what being a father used to mean. (PR NEWSWIRE)

Joe Kelly stands in front of a room of professionals. Some in the audience are schoolteachers, while others are therapists or physicians. He selects a man and a woman from the audience to join him on the stand. Looking at each of them, he says, "OK, pretend each of you are 22 years old and have decided to get married and have children. You have a completely egalitarian marriage, so you’re going to share the rearing of your children equally."

Kelly then turns to the woman and asks, "How many years' experience do you have as a baby sitter?" The response varies from two to five years or more. He then turns to the man and asks the same question.

After hearing an answer that is usually "none," Kelly turns to the audience and says, "Raise your hand if you have ever had a teenage boy who is not a member of your family baby-sit your children?"

At this point, with the room in silence, Kelly then says, "It doesn’t happen. But then we get annoyed and frustrated when men don’t know how to calm a colicky baby? What did you expect?"

According to Kelly, an author and co-founder of the U.S. advocacy group Dads and Daughters, expectations for men are not where they should be. Not only have these
attitudes and low standards worked their way into a majority of men in the media, they have worked their way into our homes.

Images of men in the media

It’s not hard to find. If you watch TV, then you’ve most likely witnessed the portrayal of the modern-day husband and father as lazy, incompetent and stupid.

Just these three characteristics are sure to bring to mind one commercial or sitcom that personifies this type of man.

"One evening, after watching Homer Simpson wreck the family car at a monster-truck rally and plunge on a skateboard into Springfield Gorge, my 6-year-old son asked me, 'Why are dads on TV so dumb?'" wrote John Tierny from the New York Times. "Where did we fathers go wrong? We spend twice as much time with our kids as we did two decades ago, but on television we're oblivious ('Jimmy Neutron'), troubled ('The Sopranos'), deranged ('Malcolm in the Middle') and generally incompetent ('Everybody Loves Raymond'). Even if Dad has a good job, like the star of 'Home Improvement,' at home he's forever making messes that must be straightened out by Mom."

The doofus dad stereotype isn’t new. There's Fred Flinstone, Dagwood Bumstead and even Charlie Brown's monotone parents. But according to Tierny, the consistency of these new portrayals has slowly created a new norm opposed to what being a father used to mean.

"While dads in 'Leave It to Beaver' and 'The Donna Reed Show' had flaws, they were close to what was then thought of as 'perfect,' part of an idealized white American family," Bob Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, told CNN. "Later, shows such as 'The Cosby Show,' 'Family Ties,' 'Growing Pains' and 'Full House' showcased caring dads of a new generation."
"But by the late 1980s, more shows wanted to distance themselves from the 'corny, syrupy stuff' — and in stepped shows such as 'Married With Children' and 'The Simpsons.'"

And that's just to mention a few examples within the sit-com sphere. Commercials have also created their own standard for men.

"Ad after ad makes doltish Dad the butt of all jokes," wrote Seth Stevenson with Slate Magazine. "He's outwitted by his children. He's the target of condescending eye rolls from his wife. He's a dumb, incompetent, sometimes even selfish oaf — but his family loves him anyway."

For example, a Huggies diapers commercial which aired early last year stated, "To prove Huggies can handle just about anything, we put them to the toughest test imaginable: dads, alone with their babies, in one house, for five days."

The assumption that dads can't take care of their own children was offensive to one man in particular. Chris Routley of Breinigsville, Penn., is a stay-at-home dad who decided to take action. After viewing the Huggies commercial, Routley put together a petition on Change.org. In his statement, Routley wrote, "Why not find a way to celebrate dads in a way that doesn't minimize, stereotype and judge us as — at best — well-meaning but second-class parents?"

In March 2012, Routley received more than 1,000 signatures on the petition. Huggies contacted Routley promising to remove the ad and to create a new ad that showed caring, competent fathers. CNN reported the new commercial slogan produced by Huggies which stated: "To prove Huggies wipes can handle anything, we asked real dads to put them to the test, with their own babies, on spaghetti night."

Matt Campbell, an administrator for Mensactivism.org, expressed his own concerns about the consequences of such media content.

"Negative general portrayals of fathers/husbands/men in TV commercials and sit-coms contributes to a decrease in men wanting to assume those roles in society, and creates the impression among others that men need not assume such roles anyways, that such simply aren't important."
Society views just as harmful

Some men, however, just laugh.

"Men have always made fun of themselves," said New York Times best-selling author and social philosopher Michael Gurian. "The kind of things that are done with men in the media would never be done with women, and that's just sort of a given. But men don't mind. They live by joking and putting each other down and lifting each other up. But the negative is that they can only be OK if the rest of society has a basic understanding and respect for boys and men."

Kelly believes that the problem is larger than merely what is shown in the media, but how we act within our own home.

"I think we as a culture have a blind spot when it comes to the role of men in families — men and women both," Kelly said. "I don't believe it's a manner of injustice or anyone being victimized, I think it's habit. The habit is that men are of secondary importance in the life of a family. Therefore we all kind of expect men to be secondary. And it's not surprising that attitude plays itself out in many ways in our culture: in media portrayals and in the habits we have as families."

If expectations of men within a society aren't up to par, and the only role model young men have comes from Peter Griffin on "Family Guy," there may be room for worry. Along with the stereotype of men being violent, Gurian said he's also concerned about the system that minimizes the father's role in the home.

"They're kind of stupid and they're not needed," Gurian said regarding fathers in the media. "So the message to the young people is that males are not needed, or Dad is not needed. That's dangerous because it's going to set up guys who will not take care of their kids, and kids who will not respect or understand the males and women who will say, 'Ah, they're not needed anyway.'"

But Kelly and Gurian both believe and remain hopeful that media isn't the only influencing factor.

"I remain optimistic that family still has more influence than media," Kelly said.
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