



By Tom Roston

I don't know if I should laugh or cry. I recently came upon a Harris Poll that was conducted last year, asking people who their favorite TV dads were. Here are the results:

1. Cliff Huxtable of "The Cosby Show"
2. Ward Cleaver of "Leave It to Beaver"
3. Jim Anderson of "Father Knows Best"
4. Andy Taylor of "The Andy Griffith Show"
5. Ozzie Nelson of "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet"
6. Mike Brady of "The Brady Bunch"
7. Howard "Mr. C" Cunningham of "Happy Days"
8. "Pa" Charles Ingalls of "Little House on the Prairie"
9. Ben Cartwright of "Bonanza"
10. Tim Taylor of "Home Improvement"
11. Danny Tanner of "Full House"
12. Archie Bunker of "All in the Family"

13. Steve Douglas of "My Three Sons"

14. Homer Simpson of "The Simpsons" and Al Bundy of "Married with Children" (tie)

What's almost entirely missing from these answers? A current TV show dad! The only one is Homer. (And he's not even human!) Where are the real dads? There's so little diversity here in fathers: it's almost entirely gee-whiz, goody-two-shoes pops who personify that dubious saying (and show) "father knows best." The exceptions are the few later entries, most of whom are of the doofus, knucklehead variety of dad, personified by Archie Bunker, Homer Simpson and Al Bundy.

These answers tell me two things:

- 1) Today, there is a void on TV of strong or significant dads that are making any impact on viewers.
- 2) There is an ideal dad which Americans continue to cling to. And he's one who wasn't realistic then, and is certainly not realistic now.

What decides what sort of dads are showing up on television? The ratings, of course. There once was a time when dads in sweaters doling out advice was what America wanted to see. And then, a new kind of father appeared, the jerk, as seen on *All in the Family*, *Married with Children*, or *That 70s Show*. I prefer to watch more complicated dads, like Tony Soprano on *The Sopranos* or Don Draper on *Mad Men*; both of whom go against the TV dad norm, as I recently discovered when I absorbed a cross-section of American dads on television, to see what dads look like on TV today.

I was surprised to find a lot of dads front and center in tube land: there's uptight Alan, on *Two and a Half Men*, the top rated comedy on television. He's a well-meaning, if dweeby father who loves his son and raises him with his brother. And there's *House of Payne*, one of the top rated cable shows, which features Curtis Payne as a lazy father figure, who, when push comes to shove, reveals a big heart. Both dads are basically jerks with big hearts. This was the running trend for most of the dads I watched, some of whom are current or recently off the air, but are still in heavy syndication, on shows such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *My Wife & Kids*. The one really noble, hard-working dad was on *Everybody Hates Chris*

I'd say warm and fuzzy, if slightly stupid, dads are the dominant representation on television today, although there is some diversity, from Julian McMahon's plastic surgeon on the demented and dark, *Nip/Tuck* to James Woods' D.A. (*Shark*), Andre Braugher's criminal mastermind (*Thief*), Keifer Sutherland's FBI agent (*24*) and Tim Roth's Dr. Lightman (*Lie to Me*). And yet, and yet, despite all of these dads (and more) on TV, cracking jokes and imparting wisdom, that Harris Poll suggests that they are not making much of an impact on Americans. It's time to look at another dad currently seen on TV, one who has an even deeper hook on the American perception of today's dad; The reality television dad.

Reality TV dads are, plain and simple, everywhere. From that sullen party boy, Jon Gosselin, from *Jon & Kate plus 8*, to the parade of failed-but-trying fathers on *Supernanny*. We see them making fools of themselves on *Wife Swap* and *Divorce Court*, or as good, loving men on *Find My Family*. And, ever since Ozzy Osbourne proved to be so popular as a dolt-if-loving dad on MTV's *The Osbournes*, there's been a slew of celebrity dads on shows such as *Being Bobby Brown*, *Gene Simmons Family Jewels*, *Luke's Parental Advisory* and Snoop Dogg's *Fatherhood*.

There may be a wide spectrum of good to bad, dads displayed on these shows, but, mostly, we see dads who mean well and are mostly messed-up. I'd venture that it's these dads—who live in a TV neverland somewhere between reality and make-believe—most define the way Americans see fatherhood today. No wonder respondents of the Harris Poll skip over these messy examples and harken back to simpler times.

As I was contemplating this slightly depressing thought, I found a surprising ray of light. If I was going to use reality TV to slam the final nail on this article, then I'd better consider youtube, right? If any media defines our culture today, it must be youtube. It may not be TV, but it's the boob tube of tomorrow. Fearing the worst, I typed "dads" on the site, and, whoa, I was surprised to find—amongst random Father's Day-related videos, some goofy stuff and episodes of the animated *American Dad*—many deeply moving tributes to fathers.

Sure, there is the hugely popular "David after Dentist," video, in which a father videotapes his 7-year-old son's delirious ramblings after he was medicated during a dental visit. It's up to you to decide if that's just funny or exploitative, but then there were several deeply emotional tributes that set me spinning. First, there was the clip of Olympic runner Derek Redmon, who tore his hamstring during a 400 meter race in 1992. It's as good as real TV gets: Redmond collapses in extreme pain, but then he gets up and limps his way to the finish line. As he stumbles along, his dad crashes onto the track and hoists Redmond onto his shoulder and helps him. I defy anyone to watch that clip, and not get misty-eyed. The image is incredible, as the father, who wears a goofy "Have you hugged your foot today?" T-shirt, shows the sort of love and support that epitomizes what a father should be.

What else comes up? As a native New Yorker, it hurts me to give credit to a Phillies fan, but, if you missed it, I'd recommend typing "Phillies dad" on the site. There, you'll see the Phillies fan who, last year, catches a foul ball and then gives it to his three-year-old daughter. The little girl quickly throws the ball away, off of the upper deck. In a split second, the dad shifts from shock—it's all caught on tape—and takes less than a moment to smile and give his daughter a huge hug. No anger, no upset. Just pure daddy love. It's probably one of the sweetest dad moments ever caught on television.

And if the Harris Pollsters call me next year, I am going to vote for him as my favorite TV dad.