

Dads - D'oh!

"The fundamental problem in fatherhood is not media images like Homer Simpson, but that we simply don't know enough about men as parents."

By John Hoffman

Originally published in Today's Parent, June 2004.

Never, *never*, get into a public argument with a character from a TV show. You always end up looking stupid.

Back in 1992, former US vice-president Dan Quayle was made to look like a fool when he took on TV character Murphy Brown for becoming a single mom by choice. Her act "mocked the importance of fathers," Quayle said.

See, Dan...um, Murphy Brown isn't actually a real person, the media chided. That was just a story, not a blueprint for family living.

Kerry Daly, a family studies professor from the University of Guelph, had a similar, though less notorious, experience when he found himself pitted against Homer Simpson. Daly, unlike Quayle, didn't pick the fight himself, but he took a sucker punch.

Daly is heading up a big, multi-part Canadian research project on fatherhood. After the funding was announced, he did numerous interviews including one with the *National Post*. When the reporter asked what the study hoped to accomplish, a small section of Daly's reply referred to negative portrayals of fathers in the news and popular media. The reporter (not Daly) presented Homer Simpson as an iconic idiot TV dad, and the headline screamed: "Study aims to salvage image of fatherhood."

In his subsequent interviews, some interviewers who had seen the *Post* story wanted to talk not about the research, but about why Daly was picking on Homer. Lighten up, they said, can't you take a joke?

Daly can take a joke. He sometimes watches *The Simpsons* with his own kids, and he's certainly not advocating spending \$1 million of taxpayers' money to deconstruct Homer's influence on the image of modern fatherhood. Unfortunately, this side trip into TV land obscured his main point and the goal of this research project (for which I am on the steering committee).

The fundamental problem in fatherhood is not negative media images, but that we simply don't know enough about men as parents. We know a lot about mothers because, for many years, mom was seen as the key to child development. In today's world, though, it is generally accepted that an involved dad is good for children. Yet we don't have a clear enough idea about what helps fathers feel confident in their parenting and close to their kids, what keeps them involved and what gets in their way.

This research project — it's actually several studies — will profile Canadian fatherhood and clarify the social context that defines, supports or hinders the involvement of Canadian fathers in their children's lives. It should help us answer questions such as: What causes so many men to become disengaged from their children after divorce? How can we ensure that fathers of kids with special needs are included in the health care system? What kinds of adjustments do immigrant fathers have to make? It's not about the image of fatherhood. That's why I support this research and I'm eager to see what it tells us.

But since media dads seem to grab the headlines, let's talk about them for a moment. In the 1960s and '70s, TV fathers were usually kind, all-knowing, sweater-clad men who dispensed wisdom from behind their newspapers or benevolent front-porch philosophers like Andy of *Mayberry*. Then at some point, around the time that much of the news coverage of fathers focused on family violence or non-payment of child support, TV and some other fictional fathers became ignorant goofs like Al Bundy (*Married With Children*) or lovable boobs like Ray Romano.

This used to bug me. In fact, when I started writing about parenting, one of my all-consuming passions was to get some positive commentary about fatherhood into the media. I think it's every bit as reasonable to wonder what a constant onslaught of negative fatherhood images will do to young male minds as it is to worry that they'll become sociopaths from playing video games like *Grand Theft Auto*.

However, I'd still rather talk about the real issues. I'm passionate about raising the level of discussion about fatherhood. That being the case, I'd be wise not to step into the ring with Homer or anybody else.