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Move over Homer, make room for real dads

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Maybe it's time for Extreme Makeover: the Dad edition.

Long gone are the days when television shows such as Father Knows Best, Bonanza and My Three Sons featured wise, strong father figures.

Now, dads mostly come in one variety: man-child screw-ups such as Homer Simpson and Hal on Malcolm in the Middle.

The latest reflection of that dad-bashing stereotype is Meet Mister Mom, a new TV reality series launched this month on NBC. The show's presumption is that when it comes to housework, dads are from Mars - or at least wedged into the well-worn lounge chair by the TV set. Put a dad in charge of the house and kids for a day or (gasp!) a whole week? And he'll quickly dissolve into a trembling, cowering pulp.

Well ... tell that to Michael Porter.

He and his three boys could do a remake of the old TV show My Three Sons. In his version, Mr. Porter stars as a stay-at-home Dad - his job the past three years. But he doesn't think what he does is a big deal - certainly not grist for a prime-time television show.

"I do the usual things around the house; cook, clean-up, take the boys to the park," says the 42-year-old Arlington dad, whose wife, Siobhan, works for a national bank. "It sounds kind of mundane, but that's what it is."

But wait...isn't it terrifying? Aren't you wringing your hands in abject fright at the start of each day?

"I think it's a badge of honor, actually," Mr. Porter says. "If you can stay home and watch your kids - well, what job could be better than that?"

Mr. Porter is part of a select group. According to Census Bureau figures, there were 147,000 stay-at-home dads in 2004, up from 64,000 10 years ago. There were another 2.3 million single-parent fathers, whose children live with them - up from 393,000 in 1970, according to the Census Bureau.

But the reality of family-friendly dads hasn't caught up with the reality-TV image of family-phobic dads. The promo for the new Meet Mister Mom series intones:

For most dads, 'man of the house' is more of an honorary title. Give dad a wrench or a carving knife and ... well, he still needs lots of supervision. Sure, he'll squeeze a melon, but he has no idea why. Many dads go off to work and leave the tough job to mom - until now."

The promo then shows a clip of Mom hurrying out of the house as her daughter says, "We're doomed," and her beleaguered husband says, "I'm sweating."

That promo has Glenn Sacks boiling.

The syndicated host of the radio talk show "His Side," says he hears from many dads who seethe over the way they are portrayed in the media.

"I was a stay-at-home dad for the first three years of my daughter's life," says the father of two. "We men have plenty of parenting skills."

Mr. Sacks, whose show airs from his hometown of Los Angeles, campaigned last fall against a Verizon DSL ad, which showed a clueless dad trying to help his daughter with homework as she sits in front of a computer.

"That's like an encyclopedia thing," the dad says, looking amazed as he peers over her shoulder. "It is an encyclopedia," the child says, sounding annoyed. She then gives her mother an imploring look, "as if to say, 'Get this idiot out of here,'" Mr. Sacks says. The mother tells the baffled dad to go wash the dog. When he lingers, she shouts, "Leave her alone!" The dad walks away sheepishly.

Verizon stopped running the ad a few weeks after Mr. Sacks started his campaign, which got national attention in the media. John Bonomo, a spokesman for Verizon, said the commercial ran its course through the end of the year and was not cut short by any campaign against it. "It certainly wasn't our intent to insult anyone," he said.

TV ads and shows that typecast men and women miss the real drama of rapidly changing attitudes of Americans toward family and work. Dads are spending more time with their children than they did 25 years ago. That trend is more pronounced among the under-40, Generation X and Generation Y dads, says Lois Backon of the Families and Work Institute, a New York-based, nonprofit research group, which recently issued a report, "Generation and Gender in the Workplace."

Among married couples with children, mothers are spending the same amount of time doing things with and taking care of their children on days when they are working today as they did 25 years ago (approximately 3.3 to 3.4 hours per workday), but fathers' time has increased by 50 percent - from 1.8 hours to 2.7 hours, according to the study.

Younger workers of both sexes are less willing to move up the career ladder if it means working longer hours, according to the report. They prefer more time with their families than workers in previous generations, Ms. Backon says.

With so many dual-income couples, "I don't know how realistic it is, where there are moms doing all the childcare and dads don't participate anymore," Ms. Backon says.

There is no longer any stigma attached to men helping around the house, says Michael Hellinghausen, the chief operating officer of a Dallas architecture firm. "In my peer group, it's just expected that the dads are able and willing to do it."

For some dads, there is no choice in the matter.

"I'm Mister Mom and Mister Dad. I have to do it all," says Roger Campbell, a single father in West Plano raising an 8-year-old son. "I have to do the things inside the house and outside the house."

Mr. Campbell coaches several of his son's sports teams, participates in Cub scouts and church activities and serves on the board of the otherwise all-mom PTA at his son's elementary school. His biggest challenge is juggling work and family. He opted out of daily journalism because the hours were too long and unpredictable. He now works as a senior editor for the American Heart Association in Dallas.

"I have a job with some flexibility, and it does help to have a supervisor and company that encourages work-family balance," he says. "But I have to be great at time management. When I put my son to bed at 8:30, his day ends, but I go to a second shift. I sit down at the computer and start working."

When dads aren't getting beat up in the media, they're mostly ignored. Go to any bookstore or magazine rack, and you'll find hundreds of stories about parenting. But with rare exceptions, they're aimed at moms.

One explanation: "Women read and men don't. That's why they target women," says Susan Bartell, a child and adolescent psychologist in New York. "Dads are often the ones making the calls to my office, asking questions."

Nevertheless the stereotype of the uninvolved dad still has some truth in it, says psychologist Nadine Kaslow. "There is still a sizeable number of dads who are still unconnected with their children, whose attention is at work or elsewhere in the world, and who are uncomfortable with kids and care-giving," says Dr. Kaslow, a professor and chief psychologist at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta.

Even more threatening to men are books such as the new **Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men** (Rodale, \$23.95). Author and psychologist Peggy Drexler states that boys who don't have a man in the house not only turn out just fine, but many fare better than boys raised in traditional homes with a father and mother.

The new breed of mothers without fathers is highlighted by celebrities such as Angelina

Jolie, Wendy Wasserstein and Diane Keaton, along with lesbian moms such as comedian Rosie O'Donnell and singer Melissa Etheridge, who are parenting children with their partners, the author notes.

"Few of these women have men as full-time parenting partner. Yet, despite their deviation from what's been deemed a 'normal' family pattern, the media routinely refer to their motherhood in a positive light," Dr. Drexler writes.

Dads have learned to find some support - just as moms have - among their own kind. Many full-time dads have joined At-Home Dads of Greater Dallas, a 7-year-old group whose membership lists 80 dads.

The group schedules play dates for their kids nearly every weekday at local parks. The dads also piggy-back on a national online network, www.slowlane.com, where their site boasts that they are "one of the largest and most active groups in the nation."

Mark Witten, who is finishing his term as head of the local group, said he decided to become a full-time dad when his wife, a database administrator, transferred to a job in Dallas from Albuquerque, where he was a music teacher. They settled in far North Dallas and now have two children: a girl in third grade and a boy starting kindergarten.

As many moms can attest, he has learned that being a full-time parent is not a job for the faint-hearted: "It's the hardest job I've ever had, and I used to deal with hundreds of kids with noisemakers."

But, he wouldn't hesitate to make the same decision again.

"I feel like I'm the luckiest guy in the world. I've been able to have a big part in my kids life."

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(FATHER FIGURES (U.S. Census by the numbers

GEORGE LOPEZ

(George Lopez)

The George Lopez Show

26.5 million fathers who are part of married-couple families with their own children under the age

of 18.

DR. HEATHCLIFF HUXTABLE

(Bill Cosby)

The Cosby Show

65 percent have annual family income of \$50,000

or more.

STEVE DOUGLAS

(Fred MacMurray)

My Three Sons

2.3 million single fathers living with

their children.

ARCHIE BUNKER (Carroll O'Connor)

All in the Family

66.3 million

fathers across

the nation.

HOMER SIMPSON

The Simpsons

21 percent are raising three

or more of their own children under 18.

MICHAEL KELSO (Ashton Kutcher)

That 70s Show 11 percent of fathers are under 30