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<th><strong>Name</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Thesis Title</strong></td>
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As soon as a television is turned on, one is guaranteed to see some sort of family life. Sitcoms have revolved around the family for decades. Granted, there have been various forms of family structures, but in a number of shows there has remained the traditional idea of a married couple with their child or children. Yet, even within these basic families there have been dramatic changes. The members of families may be similar, but roles and perceptions have not always remained the same. These changes have especially been seen in the role of the father figure.

Half a century ago, fathers were revered figures on television. They were not only breadwinners for the family, but they also always knew what was best. Father’s were smart and helpful. When referring to television dads during the time of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, Bernice Kanner says, “These TV dads were strong, dependable, always available to their children, and deeply involved in their children’s lives.”¹ The fathers then were ideal. Every child probably wants a father who is interested in him or her and will help him or her with whatever problems he or she has. That is what these fathers were. They were there to always lend a hand. William Douglas, in his book *Television Families: Is Something Wrong in Suburbia?*, mentions television fathers from the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s and, in particular, references Ward Cleaver and Steve Douglas, from *Leave It to Beaver* and *My Three Sons*, respectively. He says that the two fathers “were commonly shown in the company of their children,

providing friendship, support, instruction, and advice.”² These men were model fathers.

The mold that these fathers emerged from did not last long, though, and the image of the father slowly changed over the decades. Fathers are shown to be much more immature and less competent than they used to be portrayed. The respect that they once had has disappeared. Fathers have become more of a laughingstock than a figure to look up to as they once were. Kanner tells us that “dad no longer reigns supreme. A 1999 survey sponsored by the National Fatherhood Initiative found only four fathers out of 102 prime-time network series who are both loving and competent.”³ This is a very sad fact to see that television today hardly shows what would represent an ideal father.

As this survey shows, though, just because fathers may not be competent does not mean that they are also not loving. The survey said that we just do not see both characteristics portrayed in the same father. Many of today’s television fathers seem to fit the idea of being incompetent, but they do, however, remain caring. These men are still good fathers, in the sense that they love their families, even if they are a bit inept. Television has taken away the “power” of fathers in respect to their intelligence, but has at least kept the men in good standing as far as loving their families and caring about them. It is as if men have been put down and are not respected as fathers, but they have remained in a positive light as persons.

It is an unfortunate situation that fathers on television can no longer be seen in the way they were in the past. Fathers should be able to be perceived as both competent and caring. This, however, has fallen out of practice. There is still a beam of light, though, that is shining through. Competency may be disappearing, but concern for family is still there. This concern for the family still gives hope to the role of a father. It may be a bit unnerving that television’s fathers are losing competence, but unless they actually stop caring for their families, it will be alright.

Television’s fathers, and its families, have gone through a lot. The best way to note these changes is to take a look at the families that have shaped American television over the years. Shows that will help in the understanding of this topic are *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963), *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *The Simpsons* (1989-present), and *Boy Meets World* (1993-2000). Each of these five shows has a central father figure, and each of them has a distinct personality. We will observe these shows in chronological order from when the show had its first season, so as to see the natural progression of the portrayal of the father figure in the sitcom family.

In these shows, we will observe fathers who are well-respected, losing respect, acting like children, and teaching children. Ward Cleaver and Homer Simpson are not exactly on the same page as fathers when looking at their competency. But when it comes to all of these fathers’ concern for their families, the similarities to each other increase. With the exception of Archie Bunker, the
concern these fathers have for their families is clear. Fathers want what is best for their families even if father now knows less, rather than best.

One of America’s early popular sitcoms was *Leave It to Beaver*. Running from 1957-1963 it portrayed a nuclear family of four. The show’s main character was Theodore Cleaver, also known as “the Beaver.” He had an older brother Wally, and Ward and June were his father and mother. They were a charming family and it is easy to see why the show was so popular. Ward and June were supportive parents, and Wally, as much as he may have teased Beaver, also supported him. In fact, the parents were so supportive it could even cause problems, as in the episode “Beaver’s Poem.”

In this episode, Beaver is assigned to write a poem for school. Since the poem is due the next day, Ward agrees to help Beaver write it. As it turns out, though, Ward ends up writing the poem for Beaver. Beaver hands in his poem, which was really written by his dad. After the poem has been handed in, though, Beaver needs to read his poem and receive an award for it on the next Monday night. June tells Ward that he is going to need to talk to Beaver because Beaver cannot accept the award for a poem, or read a poem, that he did not write. When Ward talks to Beaver about the situation Beaver gets extremely upset. On the Saturday before Beaver is supposed to recite the poem, June tells Beaver that his father went to school to straighten things out. In the end, of course, everything turns out fine, and Beaver is allowed to write a new poem for Monday.

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Much of the show focuses on Beaver’s father, Ward. His primary goal with his children is to help them, and, as can be seen from this episode, he will go to extremes to help them out. In the very beginning of the episode Ward has plans to go out with June for the night after a hard day. When Beaver says that the poem is due the next day, though, Ward sacrifices his plans for Beaver’s sake. He puts his children first. As much as he wants to spend the night doing something else, he is willing to give up his night for Beaver. This is not easy to do, though. There is, in fact, one point that Ward loses his patience with Beaver and yells at him. Ward, however, is a big enough man to admit that he lost his patience when Beaver gets upset and June says that he is yelling. This is a good thing to see because it shows that Ward is not perfect. He has flaws just like any other person, but it also shows that he can be mature and admit his mistakes. His yelling does not make him a bad father in any way, but it does show his “humanness.”

Ward’s intentions are all good in helping Beaver, but his good intentions actually go too far. In wanting to help Beaver, Ward does Beaver’s assignment for him. He tells June that Beaver thinks that he wrote the poem himself and that it really is not a big deal. Ward believes that all he did was help. When Beaver needs to present his poem, though, and will be receiving an award, June tells Ward that he needs to talk to Beaver about it. Ward does not want to talk to Beaver about it and keeps putting it off, but he finally goes to speak with Beaver. As much as Ward may have been acting a little childish in not wanting to discuss this with Beaver, Ward does talk to Beaver, and then he takes his takes care of his responsibility
even further by going to talk to someone at the school to straighten things out. The lady Ward speaks with says that Ward may have helped too much, but many parents do not help at all. Ward is a good father who takes full responsibility to fix everything. He is a dedicated father whose intentions are to help his children.

This help is not just in terms of helping them to do things, but also in teaching them and helping them to grow. When Ward does talk to Beaver about the poem he has to stress the importance of honesty. Beaver after all did not write the poem, so it would not be right for him to let people think that he did. Unfortunately, Beaver thinks that he did something bad, but does not even know what he did. Ward is just trying to fulfill his role as a father by teaching Beaver right from wrong. As a father, it is his responsibility to help to teach his children morals.

By no means is Ward a perfect father, but he is certainly a good one. All he wants to do is take care of his children and help them. As seen in this episode he makes many mistakes along the way, but there is still the idea that he is the father and he knows what is best for his children. He is well-respected by his family and this can be seen in one instance where Wally even says, “Yes, sir,” to him. This is not something heard too often today. Not only are Wally’s words perhaps surprising to the modern viewer, but so are Beaver’s actions. When Beaver is going to bed at one point, he kisses his dad on the cheek. The love and respect that Beaver shows here is astounding to think of in today’s world. Even though Ward is not perfect, and does make mistakes, he still does what is right in the end, his intentions are
always good, and his family loves him for it. In this show, though, it is not only Ward who seems to know best, but June also carries quite a bit of weight.

While Ward is a strong father figure, June presents us with a strong mother figure, as well. At many points throughout the episode she is actually the one who seems to know what is best. When Ward goes to talk to Beaver about the poem he did not make this decision on his own. He only did so at the instigation of June. She tells Ward that he needs to talk to Beaver about the poem. June is also the one that teaches Wally about being honest. Wally says to June that nobody knows that Beaver did not write the poem, but June stresses the need to be honest to him. June demonstrates a very strong set of morals and really seems to be the moral backbone of the family. June does not just teach morals, but she also teaches Beaver about responsibility. She tells him that if he had just done his assignment when he first knew about it, which was three weeks earlier, then none of this would have happened.

A lot of the episode revolves around Ward and June’s relationship. From the very beginning of the episode the two of them were supposed to go out and spend time together. When Ward agrees to help Beaver and tells June that they cannot go out, June is accepting of what Ward needs to do. She understands that he is helping out Beaver, and that it is important that he do that. We again see her appreciativeness of Ward in helping Beaver when she learns that Ward wrote Beaver’s poem, which she finds corny when Beaver reads it aloud. She is upset with Ward for writing the poem for Beaver, but even though she is upset about it she is
still able to laugh and smile because she knows that Ward was not trying to cause any trouble. He was just trying to help the best he could. June’s support of Ward is even clearer when he is not around. At one point, when June tells Beaver that his father went to school to straighten things out, Wally says that their dad should not have written the poem in the first place. June agrees with Wally, and she tells Beaver that the problem could have been avoided by doing the assignment when he first received it, but, even though she is giving another lesson here, she still adds a comment about Ward doing what a lot of dads would have done. June says that sometimes parents love their kids so much that they help them too much.

June is extremely supportive of Ward and believes that he is a wonderful father. She can also take charge herself and tell Ward what needs to be done. As discussed earlier, she tells Ward that he needs to talk to Beaver, but even before he writes the poem she tells him not to. When she comes into the room where Ward is going to help Beaver, Ward says he needs to help Beaver, but she says she is just going to read the paper. When she starts humming, though, Ward says something again. She teases Ward and says that she will just go read in a closet, but then before leaving she tells him not to write the poem for Beaver. June knows Ward is helping Beaver, but she just wants him to do exactly that... help, and not do it all for him. June loves her husband and will respect his request for quiet, but she is also a woman who appears to be rather equal to Ward in a parental position. This scene shows a lot about their equality as a couple. She not only tells Ward what not to do, but she teases her husband, and reads the paper. As a woman she is a strong
character. Even though Ward is technically “the man of the house,” he does not at all act that way. He listens to his wife as an equal and there is mutual respect between the two of them. Ward and June discuss almost everything and their discussion largely revolves around taking care of the children. June supports Ward and respects his decisions, such as him helping Beaver instead of going out with her, because she knows he is doing what is best, but, when she sees Ward using poor judgment, she is there to push him to do the right thing. June is also fully present in her children’s lives. She talks to Wally after school, and she talks to Beaver about how his father had to straighten things out with the school. She is a mother who has time for both her children and her husband.

As much as there is a lot to be said about Ward and June, we must also take a look at Beaver, a third-grade boy learning right from wrong. He does what he thinks is responsible even if it is not really. When Ward asks Beaver why he did not write his poem when it was assigned three weeks earlier, Beaver says that he might have lost it if he did that. He was not procrastinating because he did not feel like doing his work. To him, he was doing what made the most sense. Chances are Beaver really would have lost it because young children are not normally that organized. Since Beaver has to do this assignment he asks his dad for help because he knows that when he is having trouble with something he can rely on his dad. He trusts in his dad’s abilities and in that his dad will be willing to help him.

Beaver also wants his dad to be proud of him because he gets upset when his dad yells at him. Beaver does not get mad and yell back, but, rather, he gets sad.
There is no sense of rebelliousness here, which may be seen in more modern television. Beaver still shows his father respect. And, shortly after his dad yells at him and Beaver is going to bed, Beaver still kisses dad on the cheek as he wishes him good night. He loves his dad and wants to be a good child.

When Ward explains that they need to be honest about the poem, Beaver, like any other child in his position would be, is scared to go to school because he is afraid to face the other children. Ward is just trying to teach Beaver that they need to be honest about the situation, but Beaver thinks that he did something wrong when, in fact, it was really his father who made the mistake. Beaver confides in Wally that all he was able to do was cry over the situation. He trusts his brother just like he trusts his father. He is upset and when he shares this with Wally, Wally acts like a good big brother and gives Beaver a handkerchief.

Wally is a very typical older brother. He both harasses and takes care of Beaver. Wally has the mentality that it is okay for him to tease Beaver in good fun, but if Beaver was ever really in trouble or upset, Wally would be there for him. The teasing and comforting is seen in many of their interactions. Beaver recites a poem and Wally makes fun of it, but then Wally says that it is really not too corny for a third grader. He makes a mean comment, but takes it back in a way. Wally’s teasing is all good-natured. Sometimes his comments will be directly at Beaver, such as this one, while other times he will make a comment about Beaver to someone else. When Beaver is upset about what the other kids at school will say, Wally says to his dad that the kids will stop harassing Beaver after a week. It is
interesting that this is right before Wally offers his handkerchief to Beaver who has been crying. Wally would never really want to hurt Beaver.

Wally and Beaver’s relationship seems to be one that is found in many sitcoms. While we will see a shift in the portrayal of fathers, siblings’ interactions have seemed to stay relatively consistent. Siblings tease and fight, but they always care about each other deep down. Despite all the times Wally teases Beaver, overall, Wally still seems to be a good big brother who is concerned with Beaver’s well-being.

While Leave It to Beaver represents a typical family picture of that day, things were changing in both television and the world not too long after. In 1971, the sitcom was changed forever with the introduction of the Bunkers on All in the Family. Rather than revolving around parents and their young children, the show focused on a father and mother, Archie and Edith, their daughter, Gloria, and her husband Michael, all living in one household. Having a family setup like this led to a commentary on the differences between very traditional conservative ideas, represented through Archie, and the contemporary liberal ideas of the time, represented through Archie’s son-in-law and Archie’s daughter. Not only are these types of attitudes expressed in the show, but Archie is also portrayed as not really caring about Edith, while she appears to want to meet all of his demands.

In the episode “Archie is Worried About His Job,”5 from season one, a lot of different interactions are portrayed, most within the family, but some with a slew of guest stars. Archie is waiting anxiously for a phone call in the middle of the night.

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5 “Archie is Worried About His Job.” All in the Family. CBS. 16 Mar. 1971.
Soon his whole family is awake and they all think that something is bothering him, but he refuses to admit this. When Michael and Gloria go upstairs, Archie explains to Edith that there will be a cutback in personnel at his job, but he says he is not worried about himself, only about some of the other men. Archie tells Edith that he is waiting for a call from Feeney, the night watchman, who is supposed to find out who is getting let go. Archie, on a much more serious note, confides in Edith that he is worried since he has not received a call. Archie is scared because his father never got over it when he stopped receiving a paycheck. Then, like in any sitcom, the humor starts again. Finally, the night watchman shows up and says that twenty percent of Archie’s department is being cut, but Archie’s position is safe. Edith, Michael, and Gloria all excitedly crowd around Archie, but Archie still seems upset. Archie goes into a mini speech about how great America is, and then his happiness shines through.

The show’s main focus is on the conservative and bigoted Archie Bunker. He is an extremely enjoyable character for a sitcom because of how strongly he sticks to his old-fashioned principles in an ever changing world, which is even present in his household. Archie is certainly not a charming man in any way. Rather than acting loving towards his family, those who love him, he is extremely sarcastic and even mean, not to mention childish about things. For example, when a sandwich is sitting on the table, in the beginning of the episode, Michael takes a bite. Archie says that it is his sandwich, and, when Michael offers it back, Archie says he does
not want it anymore. Archie does not even refer to Michael by his name; rather, he calls him “Meathead.”

When Edith asks Archie if something is on his mind when she first finds him in the kitchen in the middle of the night, he tells her that her dinner gave him indigestion. Here his wife is looking out for him, and, instead of being grateful, Archie makes fun of her cooking. Then, when Michael and Gloria figured out what was going on from a newspaper clipping Michael found, which must have fallen out of Archie’s bathrobe, Archie gets mad at Edith, assuming that she said something. He is incredibly unappreciative of all Edith does for him. He even gets mad at her for doing things he asks her to do. When Archie is excited about having his job at the end of the episode, he tells Edith to bring Feeney and him beer. However, when Archie’s stomach hurts at six o’clock in the morning he blames Edith for not only letting Mike bring pizza into the house at four in the morning, which Archie ate some of, but also for bringing Archie beer. When Edith says that he asked for beer, Archie responds, “There’s times I question your judgment.” He is not only blaming her for what he did and wanted, but, in effect, he is insulting her intelligence.

Archie gives Michael and Gloria as much of a hard time as Edith, if not more. In the beginning of the episode when Michael comes in and asks why Archie is up so late. Archie answers sarcastically that he and Edith are running away together, instead of giving Michael a straight answer. Then when Michael yawns Archie tells him his breath is terrible, and when Michael yawns again later, Archie shoves a napkin in his mouth. Archie does not treat his own daughter much better. When
she first enters the kitchen she is only wearing Michael’s shirt. To this Archie asks why they cannot just get a second pair of pajamas, and then he says “Or will that destroy something beautiful in your marriage.” His sarcasm is once again biting, and when Edith says that they are married, Archie responds that Edith and he are married as well, but they still go to bed fully dressed. Archie later tells Gloria that she can help his troubles by putting on more clothes and making herself respectable. Even his use of a word like “respectable” shows his conservative nature.

Archie is a traditional man. Archie is a patriot and believes in his country. After finding out he will keep his job he says to his family and Feeney, “I want to tell yous all something about this good old U.S. of A. Cause no man starves in this great country if he’s willing to go out there and work. A man that works eats, and we’re gonna eat now.” Then Feeney and he eat pizza. As we see from Archie’s little speech, he is quite traditional in the patriotic sense. While his patriotism is a positive example of his traditionalistic views, a lot of his traditionalism is not as good as his support of his country. He believes that his wife should do everything for him, like when he asks her for beer. For Archie, that is Edith’s place, getting him whatever he asks for. While he holds this view towards women, he also has a bad attitude toward members of other races. When telling Edith about the other workers that he is worried about, or so he says, he mentions a Puerto Rican and says, “I mean, who wants a spic with a bum leg?” And when referring to a black man, Archie says that there are not many places he can go.
The beliefs Archie holds are not just in regards to others, though, but also in regards to how he himself fits into the family household. Gloria asks Archie why he cannot share what is bothering him with his own family, and Edith supports Gloria's questioning. But Archie's reacts by saying, "A man don't bring his problems home, that's why," to which Gloria responds, "I never heard such old-fashioned garbage." Archie is old-fashioned, though. He is a man, and it would not feel right for him to express his feelings to his family.

Yet, through all of Archie's faults, he can also present himself in a more pleasant light. He does, after all, end up sharing his worries about Feeney not calling with Edith. Edith tells Archie not to worry and that their parents made it through the depression. Archie says to her, "I'll never forget the way it hit my old man. And there he was, a breadwinner all them years, and then... and then, just like that, the paychecks, they stopped coming. Why? And he was always asking why, and nobody could tell him. It was awful." He says that his dad never got over it. Archie shows real vulnerability here. And, even though he is sad, it is pleasant to see him treating his wife respectfully and appreciating her concern for him.

Edith is a sweet lady, and while she may not be portrayed as the smartest woman ever, she has a good heart and cares for her family, especially for Archie. She seems to wait on Archie and do whatever he asks her to without questioning. Many people today may wonder why she would tend to such an ungrateful husband, but that was her place. She was his wife. Edith never stops being concerned with Archie's well-being, and it truly is incredible because he is constantly being
sarcastic with her. And even when Archie denies being upset, Edith can sense that he is. She understands him. When Michael asks Edith if something is bothering Archie, Edith replies “I thought so, but he says no, but I still think so.” Edith trusts Archie, though, in other matters. When Archie still seems upset after finding out he will keep his job and Feeney asks why, Edith says that he is worried about the other men. She trusted him when he told her his fears about the other men and not himself, although she did seem a little confused as to why he was staying up the whole night to find out about them.

When it comes to dealing with her daughter and son-in-law, Edith is quite respectful. When Archie scolds Gloria for just wearing Michael’s shirt, Edith defends them by saying that they are married. Edith thinks similarly to Gloria in regards to dealing with Archie. They both want him to share his worries. Gloria, although a married adult, still appears to try to be “daddy’s little girl.” All she wants to do is help Archie with whatever is troubling him. She also has her laughs at Archie’s expense, though. One time when the phone rings Gloria gets it before Archie. It is a drunk calling, so she pretends to be the person the drunk is calling for which gets Archie furious while Gloria thinks it is hysterical.

Gloria’s relationship with Michael also leads to some laughs because of how different their relationship is from Archie and Edith’s. When Archie says men should not bring their problems home Gloria says that Michael does. She says he cries and weeps, and she keeps going with Michael trying to get her to stop by repeating her name. Finally, he says, “Gloria, shut up.” Michael is obviously
embarrassed by Gloria disclosing this information to Archie and Edith. The
difference is not just in the fact that Michael shares his feelings, though. The
difference continues in the way that Gloria and Michael handle the situation after
he tells her to shut up. Archie suggests that Michael should say “stifle,” and he
laughs at his own comment, but Michael apologizes to Gloria for saying “shut up,”
explaining that she would not let him talk. Gloria then apologizes for going
overboard. When they kiss and make up Edith says to Archie, “Archie, isn’t that
nice the way they come to an understanding?” All Archie does is look at Edith like
she’s crazy. Edith then says, “We could take a lesson from them,” to which Archie
responds, “You need your sleep, Edith.” Michael and Gloria’s relationship is not the
type of relationship that Archie and Edith have, as seen by Edith’s comment, and it
is certainly not the type of relationship that Archie wants judging by his reactions.
This shows Archie’s more traditional views being challenged by his daughter and
son-in-law. To Archie, the man is in charge and should not act like Michael does
with Gloria. Michael and Gloria portray a changing world view, though.

While Michael is definitely concerned about Archie and what may be
bothering him, the two of them can also clash. When Archie is harassing Gloria
about her wearing just a shirt, Michael says to Gloria that they should just go to
bed. He says that Archie gives them enough of a hard time during the day and they
do not need to listen to it at night, too. They also clash because they are from two
different generations on the cusp of a changing world. While Archie is all for
America and traditional ideas, Michael is more liberal and apparently does not care
for the police at all judging by his interaction with them. When the drunken caller shows up at the house and turns out to be a police sergeant, the sergeant says, “I hope you people won’t let this change your feelings about the police.” Michael replies, “Oh no, won’t change my feelings about the police,” suggesting he already has a bad opinion of the police. These differences show the father, Archie, losing his power. Archie no longer knows best, not in a changing world. While someone with his views may have once been more respected, he is instead being challenged by the younger generation.

All in all, the family members in *All in the Family* do care for each other. There are certainly problems, and Archie Bunker may not be the easiest person to get along with, but the Bunkers work as a family. As is seen towards the end of this episode, when they are told that Archie’s job is safe, Edith, Gloria, and Michael all support Archie. They are a family after all, but the father has definitely changed from the portrayal of Ward Cleaver. Ward was a competent father that knew what was best, while Archie does not command that same type of authority and respect. Archie is trying to hold onto all the respect that he can as it slips away from him. Archie is also not the helpful and caring father that Ward was, and he does not seem to quite fit in with his children, while Ward’s children did nothing but respect him. Unlike the other fathers that we will see, Archie is not that caring, at least not on the surface. The father figure was certainly changing by this time, and not for the better.
While television’s viewers may have gotten used to this new type of sitcom of the 1970s, the 1980s brought another shift. In *The Cosby Show*, viewers were presented once again with a more pleasant portrayal of the family. It shows a family model in which the parents seem to know best and where the children respect their parents. There is still something a little bit different about this show, though, and that is that the father is much more immature than in the past, a trend that seems to continue into present-day sitcoms.

The episode I take up here from Season Four, “Petanque,” does not actually include every family member of *The Cosby Show*. The only child of main focus in this episode is Theo, with Vanessa and Rudy appearing only briefly. Both older siblings, Sondra and Denise, were shown less often throughout the series than the three younger ones. In this episode there are two main plots occurring. One plot revolves around the parents, Cliff and Clair Huxtable, while the other one revolves around their son, Theo. In the plot surrounding the parents, Clair invites Cliff’s and her friends over for a nice evening of dinner and conversation. Cliff is very excited when he hears this because he and the other husband always play petanque, a game similar to bocce ball. Clair, however, asks Cliff to promise that they can have a nice evening where they can all eat, drink coffee, and just talk. The Harmons show up and they all have a very nice dinner, but soon after the men rush out to play petanque, in which they argue and act like children.

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The second plot deals with Theo and his ideas about girls. In the beginning of the episode Clair finds a “dirty” magazine in his room. When the Harmons come over to visit Cliff and Clair, they bring their daughter, Lindy, with them, whom Theo finds very attractive. Since Lindy will be going on an Outward Bound Expedition where she will be rock climbing, Theo decides to try “rock climbing” in the basement. With Lindy there, Clair makes many funny references to the magazines Theo had in his room.

Cliff Huxtable has a lot going on in his life. Not only is he the father of five, but he is also a doctor. His personality, however, may not reflect his highly respected profession. Cliff is very much like a child. When his friend, another doctor, James Harmon, comes over, it is not time for visiting, it is time to play. The same goes for James. They tease each other like children. When the Harmons arrive at their house James sees Cliff holding a pouch with his petanque balls in it. James, knowing what is in the bag, says to Cliff, “What is that you have in your hand, Dr. Huxtable?” Cliff tauntingly responds, “Looks like, to me, something that is going to humiliate and defeat Dr. Harmon.” This behavior is more likely to be expected coming from children and not two adult men, yet that is very much Cliff’s character. Clair says this very thing to Cliff when she first tells him the Harmons are coming over. She tells Cliff that she does not want him going out to play with James. She says, “You put the little steel ball in your hand and something goes to your brain. And then two grown intelligent men, doctors, start acting like juveniles.” It is amusing to see a character that has such a distinguished profession
act so silly in a way. He is certainly not a dumb man, as many fathers today are portrayed, but he is also not perceived as a very proper father either.

Looking to how Cliff treats his family, one can see that Cliff teases Theo during the episode, but it is a more mild-mannered and good-natured teasing than that shown in the previous decade with *All in the Family*. When Theo comes into the room and sees Lindy, he says he has not seen her since she was thirteen. Since it is apparent that he thinks she is cute Cliff says to Theo’s remark, “Yeah. They grow up, don’t they, son?” His teasing is in good fun, and is not at all mean-spirited. He is acting towards Theo in the way a friend would. The relationship between Cliff and Clair is also a pleasant one. Clair wants Cliff to act like an adult for this get-together, yet when Cliff is still trying to rush out to go play petanque Clair never really gets mad at him. And, just as Cliff teases Theo, Cliff and Clair tease each other as well. When Clair says that Cliff and James act like children when they play petanque, she also says that she wishes their patients could see how they argue with each other over the game. Cliff says to her, “See, that’s why you don’t know anything.” He then tells her that they do not argue; he says they debate. While the two of them are not laughing through this, they never seem to cross the line with each other where they have gone to far with the teasing. They go back and forth, but not to the point where somebody really gets offended.

In a way, Clair almost treats Cliff like a child. When the Harmons first show up, and they are sitting in the living room with Cliff and Clair, Clair is talking with Lindy. As she is talking, Cliff and James try to sneak out, to which she says, “Sit
down,” without even losing her focus on the conversation. After they eat dinner, Cliff says, “So, dinner’s over right?” and James asks, “Can we play pataque now?” Clair tells them that they have not had coffee yet, so James says, “Make mine instant,” and Cliff says, “You don’t have to stir mine.” They want to rush out to play, but all Clair says to the two of them is, “No.” In both of these situations it is interesting to see how the dad is portrayed as another kid, while the mom is seen to be more of the authority. As seen with Leave It to Beaver the dad always had the mom behind him supporting him when he was not necessarily making the best decision, but this almost shows it at an entirely new level. Clair is not just encouraging Cliff to make the right decision in regards to helping a child, but rather telling him what he cannot do, as if he himself is a child. As television has changed, the role of the father has certainly gone from the idea of “father knows best,” as one show of the past was called, to shows in which the father is portrayed as a flat-out idiot, as we will see in the analysis of The Simpsons. The Cosby Show seems to be somewhere in the middle, where, although Cliff is intelligent, he acts very childish. And while the father role is being changed in one direction, the mother role is changing in the other. Clair Huxtable is an attorney. Not only is she a powerful figure in the household, but she is also one outside of the home. Her character demonstrates how women are taking on more and more important roles in life. Television has shown women ranging from a wife supportive of her husband in the fifties and sixties to a wife who is more of a “head of the household” type in the eighties. This could all be motivated by real events in which, because of the
women’s movement, women were becoming much more empowered and were no longer “inferior” to men.

Most of Theo’s interactions in this episode took place with his mom and with their guest, Lindy Harmon. While he did not really deal with Cliff too much in this episode, his respect for his parents authority is demonstrated with his interactions with Clair. When Clair discovers an obscene magazine called “Car and Woman Magazine” in Theo’s room, she tells Theo to get rid of it and any others he has like it. A little later in the episode, Theo walks in with a huge pile of magazines that he is going to throw out, respecting his mother’s wishes. When Clair first sees the magazine she says, “This magazine is demeaning to women,” showing her stance on women’s empowerment. Her interactions with Theo continue to focus on how he views girls. After first saying “hello” to Lindy, Theo follows his mom into the kitchen. He says to his mom that Lindy is unbelievable and that he would have dressed better if he knew she was going to look like that. Clair says, “Oh, so you dress according to the way the girl looks,” and Theo says that he does. Then Clair says, “So, if the girl were not attractive you would come down in a ripped t-shirt and dirty overalls.” Theo says that he is a gentlemen and that he would have worn a clean t-shirt even if she was unattractive. Theo represents a very shallow teenager who cares mainly about a girl’s appearance. He says to Clair, when she first finds the magazine in his room, that he would like to date girls like the ones in his magazines, even though he would not want to settle down with someone like them. Clair’s goal with Theo is to teach him. In this episode her lessons are mainly
focused on respect for women. She is his mother, and because of that she has the responsibility of teaching him. Theo, in turn, respects her as his mother and listens and obeys her.

As much as Clair teases Theo and gives him a hard time about his magazines, she also turns it into a lesson. This is a major difference from what we have seen with Archie Bunker's teasing of his family. Archie’s teasing was often mean and cruel, and it was certainly not used in a positive way as we see in *The Cosby Show*. At the very end of the episode Cliff and James try to get the Harmon’s car to start and Mrs. Harmon says that Cliff and James “managed to disconnect every hose and wire connected to the engine.” Clair then says that everything will be alright because Lindy just went over to fix everything. Theo is impressed that Lindy can fix cars. Clair uses this as her lesson. She says, “That’s right, son, take a good look because this is the picture you want to see. See, now, that young lady is not draped over the hood; she’s underneath it working. And note, note the position of the men, they are exactly where they belong, sitting on the curb.” When Clair is talking, Theo looks down and then at her, knowing what point she is trying to convey. Clair smiles at Theo when she is done talking and kisses Theo on the cheek. Theo also smiles. He shakes his head, and looks back out the window. He is not bitter towards his mom for giving him this lesson; he does not fight her on it. He just accepts it. Theo learns from Clair. Not only is this a lesson for Theo, but it also helps her to show what women are capable of and that men are not that high and mighty.
There is only a short bit of time in this episode in which any other children are present, but, when they are seen, Vanessa and Rudy act as siblings do so frequently; they tease Theo. When Vanessa and Rudy make comments about Theo liking Lindy, with everyone in the room at the time, Theo suggests to Lindy that they go somewhere where they can talk about Outward Bound, the program that Lindy is involved with. Lindy says that she has a pamphlet in her car that he can go get with her. Vanessa and Rudy say that they want to learn about it, too, just so they can follow Theo and Lindy, but Clair sends them away to go watch television. As they are leaving, Rudy says, “Yeah, maybe there’s a love story on.” Teasing among siblings seems to be a theme that has stayed consistent over the years. It was seen back with *Leave It to Beaver* and will be seen in both *The Simpsons* and *Boy Meets World*.

*The Cosby Show* seems to fit naturally in the progression of television sitcom history. It is helping in the moving along from the very traditional patriarchal family of the past to a more modern television family structure. A lot has occurred by this point. There has been the traditional family of the 1950s and 1960s, the turbulently changing family model of the 1970s, and then some effects from the changes in the 1970s have been seen in the 1980s.

In 1989 the world was introduced to one of television’s most popular cartoon families: The Simpsons. This show revolves around the citizens of Springfield, mainly focusing on the Simpson family, a nuclear family of five consisting of father and mother, Homer and Marge, and their three children, Bart, Lisa, and baby
Maggie. *The Simpsons,* as much as it can have its redeeming qualities, is hardly *Leave It to Beaver.* Father no longer knows best, in fact, he hardly seems to know anything. In fact, in the eyes of *The Simpsons* creator, Matt Groening, this is “the anti-Cosby show.” This is interesting in that *The Cosby Show* was a family show running at the same time as *The Simpsons.* The Simpsons family is bit out there, but even with its new spin on the family, there are still positive remains of past shows in it.

An episode that can give insight into this family is “The Summer of 4 ft. 2,” the last episode of the seventh season. The episode revolves mainly around daughter Lisa and her realization of her unpopularity. When the school year ends, and it is yearbook signing time, nobody signs Lisa’s yearbook. Meanwhile, Homer is talking to their neighbor Ned Flanders, who asks Homer if the Simpson family would like to spend time at the Flanders’ beach house since the Flanders’ cannot use it. Homer accepts the offer, so the Simpsons go to the beach. Marge tells Bart that he can bring his friend Milhouse, and that Lisa can bring a friend, too. When Lisa does not have a friend to bring she decides to try to make new friends while on vacation by acting like someone else. She figures that she needs to change who she is to make friends.

Lisa’s plan works. She finds a group of other kids who like her and she spends all of her time while at the beach house with them. Bart becomes extremely

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jealous of Lisa’s popularity and decides to sabotage her by showing Lisa’s friends her yearbook which shows who the real Lisa is. Lisa is devastated and runs away crying. She is furious at Bart for what he has done. In the end, though, Lisa learns that her friends care about her because she is a good person, and that is enough.

While Homer is not the main focus of this episode, he is still present enough to get an understanding of the type of person he is. Homer, to put it bluntly, is a bit of an idiot. And yet, through his immaturity and flaws, there is still something nice about him. In this episode, there are actually a few instances in which he seems to be taking real responsibility as the man of the house. He is the one that sets up their vacation at the Flanders’ beach house. In fact, he somehow negotiates a deal with Flanders. Homer makes staying in Flanders beach house sound like a bad thing, so Flanders says that he will look at Homer’s septic tank if it will get him to go to the beach house. Homer says, “Deal! See Flanders, you give a little, you get a little.” As much as this negotiation was really rather stupid, Homer was taking charge. It is also necessary to understand here that Ned Flanders is a character who is too happy and pleasant all the time. He is a religious man who just likes to be good to others, but as can be seen here, he is doing all the giving and really getting nothing, although it does seem important for him to have the Simpsons stay at his beach house. His kindness can certainly be quite overbearing, though.

Not only was setting up the trip done by Homer, but he is also the one who “runs” the trip in a way. He packs the car, he drives, and when they arrive at the Flanders’ beach house and there is a note on the door, he is the one to read it aloud
to the family. All of these actions, as small as they are, show a certain level of responsibility that Homer is displaying. He is leading his family, which is what a father should do.

Homer, however, is probably more well-known for his lack of responsibility and intelligence rather than for being responsible. A simple example of Homer’s typical behavior is when he forgets to bring his swimsuit, so he improvises. He uses a welcome mat like a speedo and goes outside. As soon as he steps out, police lights are seen, indicating he is in trouble. Then, later in the episode, Homer is busy committing a much bigger offense than that of indecent exposure, or whatever may have been the actual reason for the cops to stop him. Since it is Independence Day, Homer decides to buy illegal fireworks. He goes into a store, with a cashier who has an astounding resemblance to Apu, the owner of the Kwik-E-Mart in Springfield. Homer goes into the store and tries to act nonchalant when asking for the fireworks. What does nonchalant mean for Homer, though? He goes in and says, “Uh, yeah, um, uh, let me have one o’ those porno magazines, large box o’ condoms, a bottle o’ Ol’ Harper, couple o’ those panty shields, and some illegal fireworks, and one o’ those disposable enemas, uh, neh, make it two.” When he mentions the fireworks he mutters it and says it quickly. The cashier says that selling fireworks is prohibited, but as soon as a man leaves the store, he tells Homer to follow him, and he brings Homer into a room full of fireworks. Then, when Homer brings one back to the house, he lights it on the stove and part of the fuse falls off, leaving a very short, lit fuse. Homer puts it in the fridge, screams realizing he will ruin the beer,
and then puts it in the dishwasher. It explodes in there and causes the sink to overflow with black gunk.

There is so much wrong with Homer that can be seen from this scenario. First of all, he is breaking the law. He is purchasing and using something illegal. Then when he gets to the house and needs something to light it with he asks Bart for matches. When Bart does not have any, he then asks if he has a lighter. This shows irresponsibility in parenting. In shows of the past, parents probably would not have allowed children Bart’s age to have any matches or lighters, while Homer expects his son to have something to light the fuse with. Homer is then careless and disregards safety even more so than just using the firework in general, but he actually lights it in the house. After potentially saving himself from harm by putting it in the fridge, he risks hurting himself again to save beer, and then destroys the Flanders’ kitchen when it blows up in the dishwasher. His carelessness ruined somebody else’s property.

Anybody could look at Homer in a situation like this and see that he is not portrayed as a good dad. At least, not in the way fathers used to be portrayed. Fathers in the past would probably not even be in a situation like this because chances are they would never do something illegal. If, perchance, they did do something illegal, they would most likely correct the problem, rather than cause more problems as they go along. To see the change in the behavior of fathers in past television shows to the behavior of Homer in a scene like this shows a real devaluation of the father role in television today.
Homer’s silly nature, however, can also be nice as we see in his relationship with his children. When Lisa brings her suitcase out to Homer when they are getting ready to leave, which is empty, Homer says that Lisa is traveling light. Lisa, because she is upset about not having any friends and wants to change her image, says sarcastically that maybe Homer is getting stronger. Homer replies, “Well, I have been eating more.” His response does not even make sense, but he is happy when he says it. He feels like he has been paid a real compliment, and he enjoyed hearing it from his daughter.

In another scene, Homer, Marge, Bart, and Milhouse are playing a board game, *Mystery Date*. When Bart winds up with a nerdy looking mystery date, Marge and Homer crack up laughing. Homer says that it looks like Milhouse and laughs even more. Bart is annoyed and asks, “How come Lisa doesn’t have to play? Why does she get to hang out with her friends?” Homer responds, “You got friends, you got the dud right here.” He elbows Milhouse and says, “Stand up for yourself, poindexter,” then he glares at Milhouse. Homer is laughing at his child’s and his child’s friend’s expense, but he is doing it in good humor. He is just teasing them. Granted, in many episodes, a classic *Simpsons* moment is Homer strangling Bart, yet the two of them seem to get along well many times. In fact, Homer may not be as “mean” to Bart as Archie Bunker was to Michael.

Then there is Homer’s marriage. This episode does not focus on Marge and Homer’s relationship, but there are some funny moments with the two of them in this episode. When Marge finds all of the strange things that Homer has bought
from the store when he bought the firework, she says to him, “Gee, you know, I don’t know what you’ve got planned for tonight, Homer, but count me out.” Homer had bought a couple of sexual things, so Marge could only assume that Homer was planning something to do with sex. It is amusing that she just thinks he had something strange in mind and says she does not want anything to do with it right then and there. Also, when playing Mystery Date, Homer reveals his mystery date and says, “Ooh, captain of the football team, he’s a dreamboat. Don’t wait up, Marge.” Marge giggles. So, there is a certain amount of romance in their marriage that they can joke in this manner. If they were not a romantic couple, Homer would most likely not tease Marge like this. In fact, it is sweet in many episodes when Marge calls Homer, “Homey”. They are a great couple who really care about each other.

Marge is not only a wonderful wife, but she is also a dear mother. She can be tough when she has to be, but she is also a friend to her children. When Lisa is getting ready for their trip she asks her mom, “Mom, why don’t I have any friends?” Marge says that they have each other and that she had always dreamed her daughter would be her best friend. Lisa pats Marge’s leg and says that they are, but she needs to have friends that are kids her own age, too. Marge tells Lisa that she will make friends, and she just needs to be herself.

After they arrive at the beach house and Lisa tells her mom that she did not have her swimsuit, since she “forgot to pack,” they go out shopping. Marge is picking out cute, little kid swimsuits, but Lisa says that she is “trying to go for a
different look this year.” After Lisa finds an outfit she likes, she tells Marge that she wants to find other kids rather than go somewhere else with her. Marge is disappointed but says it is okay for her to go. Marge then talks to Maggie and says, “You’ll be my friend. I’m never, never gonna let you get away.” Maggie looks worried about this. All Marge wants here is to be friends with her daughters. She is trying to take care of Lisa in a motherly way, but she is also hoping to spend time with her. There is even one scene in which Marge is trying to be motherly by bringing out tang and rice crispie squares for Lisa and her friends, but when one of Lisa’s friends says that Lisa’s mom is cool, and another kid says that her mom would “be butting in with rice crispie squares and tang,” Marge quickly turns around and walks back out of the room. Marge’s actions show that she wants to help Lisa. At first she wants to help by being motherly, but then she decides to help by not embarrassing her daughter.

It is not enough for a mother just to be a friend to her children, though. Parents need to set rules, too. At one point, Bart is jealous of Lisa and her new friends. He wants to go hang out with them. Marge says to Bart, “I don’t think you should. Let Lisa be alone with her new friends.” Bart replies, “They’re my friends rightfully. She only got them by copying me.” Marge tells him to stay where he is. She is both taking care of Lisa and asserting her parental authority.

The reason Lisa wanted to make friends so badly was because when yearbooks came out she realized she was unpopular. She says to herself, “I don’t get it. Straight A’s, perfect attendance, bathroom timer. I should be the most
popular girl in school.” She decides that she needs to change who she is to make friends because she believes that being herself is not working. Through her talks with her mom it is obvious that she respects and loves Marge, but she still needs more. She needs friendship. Not being popular is made worse for her by the fact that Bart is extremely popular. When she forms a group of friends at the beach, though, it is like a role reversal because Lisa becomes the cool one, and her new friends do not like Bart. Lisa tells them that her brother is dorky and likes libraries, things that really describe her more than him. She wants to look cool, though.

Bart is very aware of his popularity. When Milhouse tells him that Lisa is skateboarding with these other kids, Bart says, “Lisa? With people?” He laughs and snorts to himself. Then he says, “If they’re impressed by her, I’m gonna Bart their world.” Bart knows that he is much more popular than Lisa, but when the kids do not like him, he gets upset. Since Bart becomes so jealous, he tries to sabotage Lisa’s friendship with these new kids by showing them her yearbook to make them see who she really is. Like other shows, sibling conflict always exists. This is more than typical teasing, though, and Bart truly hurts Lisa. Lisa’s pain is made apparent at breakfast the next morning. Bart comes in and says, “I guess my little yearbook stunt was pretty rough, but it did teach you a lesson. It’s important to be yourself.” He smiles, thinking he has really taught her something. Lisa flips out, though, and grabs Bart by his shirt collar. She growls, “I know exactly who I am, I am the sister of a rotten, jealous, mean little sneak. You cost me my only
friends. You’ve ruined my life.” Then Marge comes back into the room and says that there is a carnival that night.

Lisa and Bart continue their fight at the carnival, which ends up with Lisa walking back to the house alone. Bart feels bad and calls after her to wait, but she does not stop. Because of all she has gone through, Lisa says to herself, “Being myself didn’t work. Being someone else didn’t work. Maybe I just wasn’t meant to have friends.” This is where the redeeming quality of *The Simpsons* really kicks in, though. It does not end with Bart being a jerk and Lisa being miserable. It ends with lessons for both of them. Lisa returns to find her friends outside the house. They decorated the car with shells, and some shells spelled out “LISA RULES.” Lisa’s one friend says, “Look, we don’t care who you were, and you can’t fake the kind of good person that you are.” Lisa learns that being a good person is enough to get her friends. Not only does she learn this lesson, but Bart, too, learns something. He realizes he was being a lousy brother, and he ends up getting Lisa’s friends to sign her yearbook. When Lisa sees this, she is deeply touched and thanks Bart. Sibling interactions are really something incredible. They went from being furious with each other to caring for each other very quickly.

The Simpson family may not be as bad as they can seem at a quick glance. This is especially the case for Homer. Paul Cantor says that “Homer is the distillation of pure fatherhood. Take away all the qualities that make for a genuinely good father—wisdom, compassion, even temper, selflessness—and what you have left is Homer Simpson with his pure, mindless, dogged devotion to his
family.”\textsuperscript{10} Maybe he is not the smartest and most competent father, but he cares. That should count for something. Still describing Homer, Cantor says, “He continually fails at being a good father, but he never gives up trying, and in some basic and important sense that makes him a good father.”\textsuperscript{11} It is his care for his family and concern for them that makes Homer a good dad despite his shortcomings in terms of his competence.

The Simpson family does indeed care for each other, just as the television families of the past cared for their own. Homer may be a bit inept, but he still cares for his family. And the rest of the Simpsons also love and respect each other. So, while \textit{The Simpsons} may be a change in the way the family is presented, and perhaps a bit of a stretch from the typical family sitcoms of the past, there is still something there that makes it represent a typical good family. We are presented here with a family that is hardly ideal and we are shown a father who is less than competent, but he and his family care for each other.

Finally, we get to \textit{Boy Meets World} which ran from 1993-2000. This series focused around the main character, Cory Matthews, growing up from sixth grade through the middle of college. While much of the show focused on school, friends, and romance, a great deal of it also revolved around family life. Cory came from an intact family with a father and mother, Alan and Amy, an older brother, Eric, and a


younger sister, Morgan. Alan and Amy also have another baby, Joshua, in season six. Other main characters in the show included Cory’s best friend, Shawn Hunter, his teacher/principal/neighbor/mentor Mr. Feeny, and his girlfriend, and eventual wife, Topanga Lawrence. This show gives an example, in relatively recent television, of a caring father who still makes many mistakes and is not a father who understands what to do without some help.

“Raging Cory,” an episode from season five, is an excellent episode to study to understand the family in *Boy Meets World*. Eric is playing basketball with his dad. Cory wants to play basketball with his father like Eric gets to, and when his dad does not want to play, Cory accidental knocks his father over. Cory is upset that his whole relationship his father is about talking and that they never do anything together. Once this problem is resolved, Eric is then hurt because his dad wants to do things with him, but he never talks to him. Eric also ends up knocking Alan over. Amy helps Alan to realize that neither of their sons has a full relationship with Alan because he split himself between them. In the end, Alan shows a desire to really listen to what Eric has to say.

Alan Matthews wants to be a good father. He likes to spend time with his sons and he likes to have conversations with them. He separates the two, though. One son has conversations with him; the other plays sports with him. Neither son is receiving a full relationship with their father. This is the problem presented in this episode. Alan believes that he is a great father, and, in his intentions, he is. He cares about his family and wants to be a part of their lives, but it is difficult. In

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the very beginning of the episode he and Eric are playing basketball for their own championship game. They laugh and have fun. They are bonding. Alan is involved with Eric. The two of them are pals just having a good time.

Cory and his dad have a different type of relationship. He tells Cory that he loves when they talk, and he says, “I enjoy your opinions and your views on things.” Alan likes to know what Cory thinks. Cory is somebody that Alan can talk to and have a real conversation. When they talk together, there is something special there, and it is not just a nonsense conversation. Alan and Cory do things like going to the museum together to look at pieces and try to figure out what the artist is saying. They share more of an intellectual bond.

Unfortunately, Alan does not realize the faults in his fathering without some help. He believes that he treats his sons well and is involved in both of their lives. And he is, but he is not fully involved in either of their lives. As much as he is a good dad in respects to caring for his children, he is not the type of father who can just know what is right and wrong without some guidance of his own, as if he was a kid. Late at night, after the incident with Cory knocking Alan over, Mr. Feeny knocks on the Matthews’ door because Alan is still awake. Mr. Feeny is extremely involved in the Matthews’ lives, and he is always there to give advice. Since nobody came over to talk to him about what happened, he is a bit upset. Alan tells Mr. Feeny that he is an adult and can take care of the situation without any help. Mr. Feeny apologizes and begins to leave, but then Alan starts talking and says that Cory pushed him. Both of the men say that it does not sound like Cory, and Alan
says, “I mean, he knows if anything is bothering him, he can come and talk to me, I mean, talking is the basis of our relationship.” The ever wise Mr. Feeny replies, “Maybe that’s what’s bothering him.” With Mr. Feeny’s advice Alan realizes that he can still learn, even as an adult. He does not always know best, and he says to Mr. Feeny, “You never stop teaching, do you George?” Here is a grown man thinking that he does not need advice like a child would. He believes that he is capable of handling a problem on his own, but when it comes down to it, he is still learning and growing. Alan is not a perfect father. He needs help at times.

After receiving advice from Mr. Feeny, Alan is then able to help patch up his relationship with Cory. Alan demonstrates an extraordinary ability here to accept and use someone’s advice. Instead of hanging onto his pride and doing what he believes is best he takes Mr. Feeny’s advice. Since Eric and he were planning to go skydiving together, Alan decides to bring Cory along with them. It is up in the plane that Alan expresses his feelings to Cory. Alan tells Cory before they jump how he feels about their relationship. Alan says to Cory, “If you’re that upset about something, I have to take a hard look at what I’m doing wrong.” He admits that he messed up, but he is trying to correct it. Cory tells Alan that he wants to do things and not just talk. Alan says that is fine, but he does not want to lose talking with Cory, which is the part of their relationship that is most special to Alan. It is hard for everyone to hear each other, though, because they are in a plane. When Alan then says he loves when he and Cory talk Cory and Eric are both surprised. Cory is happy, but now Eric is sad. This scene is a far cry from Archie Bunker who never
wanted to express his emotions with his family. Alan, however, is a more modern father. He is beyond the idea that a man cannot express himself if he is upset or scared. Since he is able to share how he feels, his relationships with his family can be nurtured much better than if he shut himself off. Alan is demonstrating his ability to be a good father by doing what he can to fix the situation.

Alan may have fixed his relationship with Cory, but now he has hurt his relationship with Eric. After Cory jumps out of the plane to prove himself, Eric tries to talk to Alan. Eric asks his father, “Hey, h-how come, like, I don’t have that special relationship like you have with Cory?” Alan cannot hear Eric at first. Then Eric says, “Well, like, do you value my views and opinions on things?” At this point, however, Alan sort of ignores Eric and watches Cory. He is relieved that Cory’s chute opened, and when he says something about it, Eric does not care. Eric says to his dad, “All we ever do is buddy stuff. We have nothing. I want more. From this moment on, you gotta start listening to my views on philosophy, politics, and what makes the universe go ‘round.” At this Alan says, “I don’t think so,” and he jumps. Eric jumps after his dad, still trying to talk to him. In this example, Alan has gone, in a short period of time, from being a caring and concerned father for Cory, to a horrible father to Eric. As Eric later points out to Alan, Alan jumped out of a plane instead of talking to his own son. Alan really messed up as a dad here. He was not thinking at all about his son. His actions must have been incredibly painful for Eric. Eric tells his dad that all he wanted to do was talk like Alan does with Cory. Alan does not want to talk at this point because he is playing basketball with Cory.
Eric fights Alan over the ball and pushes Alan over. In this situation, two key things are happening. Alan has changed his relationship with Cory. He is now doing things with Cory. Their relationship has expanded. At the same time he is hurting his relationship with Eric by ignoring Eric’s need to talk with him. Alan is a very human character with both his good traits and his flaws accentuated.

Near the end of the episode, when Alan takes Eric and Cory to a museum, he really listens to Eric. After Eric impresses Alan with his interpretation of a piece and then with his knowledge of all different types of artwork, Alan tells Eric that he would love to hear what he has to say about another piece. Alan has come to the realization that he needs to give his sons a more well-rounded relationship with him. By this point he learns to manage relationships with Cory and with Eric where he can talk and do things with each of them.

This learning experience did not happen without help from his wife, though. Amy is extremely supportive of Alan, and she loves both him and their children very much. While she is not the main focus of this episode, her role is incredibly insightful. One night, after patching things up with Cory, but then hurting Eric, Alan plays basketball by himself. Amy then comes out. Alan asks her what he is doing wrong, but then he says that he is not doing anything wrong and that he is a very good father. Amy agrees and says that he is a very good father to his son and daughter. Alan says that they have two sons and Amy responds, “We do?” Alan catches on that there is about to be a lesson. She wants to help her husband be a better father. Amy knows that Alan is already a good father, but she believes he
can do even better. Amy asks Alan if he remembers that they wanted a boy and a girl. Then she says to him that on the way there they ended up with “two complete boys that want a complete relationship with their dad. And now they are calling you on it.” Alan says that they have a complete relationship, but Amy says they do not. Alan then repeats, “No they don’t.” It is an amusing line because he knows that she has a reason for saying this even though he believes that his relationship with his children is complete. Amy tells Alan that Cory gets his mind and Eric gets sports, to which Alan defends himself saying that that is just the way it is. Amy shows exceptionally strong character here and says, “No, Alan, you are the father. You have defined the relationships. Honey, be proud that we have raised them so well that they can tell you they want more.” Alan then realizes that having two boys is even better than having just one.

Through this brief interaction between Amy and Alan, a real light is shed into Amy’s character. She obviously supports her husband. All she cares about doing in this instance is helping him to better his relationship with their sons. When she says that they have raised their boys well she is respecting him as a father even as she is encouraging him to be an even better one. She knows that he has a good heart and wants to be a good dad. Amy and Alan are shown as equals. Amy does not come down on Alan as if he is a horrible father, and Alan respects Amy and what she has to say instead of blowing her off. He realizes that she is right. Just like in his interaction with Mr. Feeny, Alan is able to accept someone
else’s criticism and lesson. This is especially good to see in his relationship with his wife.

Although Amy does not have much interaction with her two sons in this episode, her care for them is present in her conversation with Alan. By wanting him to form better relationships with the boys, she is looking out for them. She wants her sons to each have a complete relationship with their father. She knows that they are being cheated out of something they deserve if Alan does not change the way he acts towards them. Amy wants what is best for her entire family and does whatever she can to help them have the best relationships that they can. Amy is a wonderful wife and mother whose main concern is for her family.

While this episode revolves around Alan quite a bit, the main character of the series is Cory. Cory is typical teenage boy experiencing life and all its lessons. He has many wonderful relationships in his life. This is not to say that there are never any problems, as has already been seen. In the very beginning of the episode Cory feels neglected by his father and older brother. When Alan and Eric are playing basketball Cory calls the next game. Eric says that there is not going to be another game, and Alan says, “This is for the Matthews’ championship.” Cory responds, “Well, I’m a Matthews.” And yet, even though he is a Matthews, Eric and Alan did not include him in their game. When Eric and Alan are done playing, Alan wants a rematch, but Eric says no. Cory then goes to play with his dad, but Alan says that he’s exhausted. At this, Cory points out that he was just about to play with Eric. Alan says that was for the championship, so Cory says that they will have their own
championship. When Alan will not play and says that maybe they will play the next day, Cory says, “What, if Eric's not around? C'mon.” It is apparent that Cory is upset about his father's attitude. Cory thinks that his dad would rather play with Eric and that he becomes his dad's second choice. Cory and Alan get frustrated with each other and fight over the ball, which ends with Alan falling. When Amy comes out and sees this she asks what happened. Alan tells her, as he walks away, to ask Cory. Cory says, “I just wanted to play.” Alan is now upset with the way Cory behaved, but the only reason Cory is so upset is because of the way his dad was treating him. It seemed like his dad did not want to spend time with him.

Cory's thoughts about his relationship with his dad are expressed when he is seen interacting with Shawn, and then, with Topanga. Cory tells Shawn that Eric has a good relationship with their dad, but all he gets to do is talk with his dad. Shawn tells Cory that he has a great relationship with his dad, but Cory is still upset. He says, “I'm not gonna go through the rest of my life as the guy my father talked to. You know, great conversations are not memories you look back on.” Cory does not realize how important his conversations are with his dad. They really do have a great relationship in that respect. They can talk and really understand each other, but Cory wants more than this. Cory again shows his pain when he is with Topanga. Topanga, like Shawn, tells Cory how good his relationship with his father is. She says, “Cory, go home and talk this out with him.” This is what is bothering Cory so much, though. He tells her that that is what their whole relationship is: talking. He says that Eric and his dad do stuff and he wants to as well. Talking is
not good enough for him. He wants to bond with his father as if they were friends just hanging out. Cory is missing out on that part of the relationship with his father.

Eric has the exact opposite problem with his father. He gets to do things with him, but never gets to have a real conversation with him. After Eric got upset and pushed his dad because Alan jumped out of a plane and did not want to talk to Eric, Eric ends up talking with Cory about how he is upset about his relationship with their dad. Eric says to Cory, about their dad, “All we ever do is pal around, you know? That’s what our relationship is. It’s not like the relationship you have with dad. I mean, I want to talk to him, too.” Cory says that they do talk, but Eric says he wants to talk about important things like Cory and their dad do. All Eric talks about with his dad is sports and the girls on Baywatch. Eric tells Cory, “It’s time people learn who the real Eric was.”

Later on, Alan gets to see the real Eric. When they go to the museum Alan asks Eric what he thinks about a certain abstract piece. Eric says there are two monkeys that are fighting over a coconut, which represents the father monkey’s attention. Alan thinks that maybe it was not a good idea to do this. Cory says that “it is open to interpretation,” which shows him supporting Eric’s interpretation and Eric’s chance to talk. Eric then goes on and says, “My interpretation is that the artist is illustrating a very... painful situation, where the father monkey has two sons, but only one coconut. So, he splits the coconut in half, but... only half a coconut isn’t enough for either son.” Alan is very impressed and surprised by this.
Eric then lists a number of different types of art. When he mentions his favorite artist he says that his dad probably did not know that, and Alan says that he did not. Eric tells his dad he learned it all in school, but the two of them never talked about it. Eric did not think that Alan would want to hear about it from him. Eric says, “I just always tried to be the person I thought you wanted me to be.” His dad smiles and puts his hand on Eric and that is when they go over to another piece for Eric to tell his dad more. As it turns out, the title of the piece that Eric first explained was *Monkeys with Coconut*.

Cory and Eric have a great relationship as brothers. When Eric was upset, for example, he confided with Cory and told Cory how he felt. As seen here they can really talk to each other and care about each other. Yet, they are not always as caring. When they are going skydiving and Eric gets upset, Eric is trying to talk to his dad after Cory jumps. At this point Eric does not really care that Cory’s parachute opened, which means Cory is safe, because Eric is focused on his own problem with his dad. In this episode, however, we do not see any real conflicts between Cory and Eric. Like other siblings that have been looked at, though, they have both their good times together and their bad times.

There is also Morgan Matthews, Cory and Eric’s younger sister. While the show, in general, does not focus on her that much, there is a sweet interaction between her and her dad at the end of this episode. Alan is taking down the basketball hoop because of all the problems it has caused. Morgan comes outside and Alan starts asking her how their relationship is. Morgan seems to think that it
is pretty good and that they talk and have fun together. Alan then says, “I shoulda had all girls.” They high-five and Alan puts his arm around her and kisses her on the head. While it does not show a lot about Morgan, it is just a nice scene with a dad and his daughter.

The Matthews family is a wonderful sitcom family. By no means are they perfect, but they are a family with a positive message. They show television viewers what family is all about and the care that a family should have for each other. In terms of changing television shows, *Boy Meets World* has been able to keep some good old-fashioned family values, yet in looking at the father, the idea of father knows best has still not resurfaced.

We have just examined decades of popular television sitcom families, and we have observed characters and there relationships with one another. Fathers have played many different types of roles. What does it all mean, though? Has television changed our depictions of families and the so-called “heads-of-the-households?”

The sitcom family, in general, must first be discussed. Out of the shows analyzed here, all of them dealt with parents and their children. *All in the Family* was a bit of an exception because the children were adults, but the daughter and son-in-law did still live with the parents. In each of these families, there were certainly similarities across the board. Siblings could be both supportive of one another and also give each other a hard time and the children seemed to respect their parents. It also seemed that for the most part spouses supported one another.
The exception to this case may have been Archie and Edith. While Edith always did whatever she could for Archie, he did not really do anything for her.

Basic family structure may be similar in television shows over the decades, but the father figure has undergone some serious changes. Years ago fathers were respected. They were not necessarily perfect, but they were competent, and they were caring. These two descriptions are highly appropriate in looking at fathers throughout television history. It is interesting to see that one of these words has gone through incredible changes during the years and the other seems to have stayed relatively true to what the father represents.

Fathers' competence has come a far way from what it was in the 1950s. Actually, it may be better to say that it has gone far away. The men of the house do not seem to know as much as they used to. Basically, the fathers in sitcoms seem to have gotten dumber. Looking at *Leave It to Beaver* the basic plot of the episode is that Beaver asks for his dad's help on an assignment. This shows a couple of things. Beaver knows that his dad is smart and will be able to help him with something that may prove difficult for him on his own. Not only that, but it also shows that Beaver has a certain dependence on his father. He needs his father. This is not the case anymore. Also, in regards to the father, the mother plays an important role. In *Leave It to Beaver*, June Cleaver is always encouraging Ward to do the right thing, and actually represents a strong female character. Ward is still respected as a man and father, but June can definitely be the driving force behind what he does. And even though Ward does not always know best, he is still
represented in a positive light, just human. He makes mistakes just like anyone else.

In All in the Family Archie is still “in charge” in a way. Edith is always waiting on him and doing whatever he asks, but Archie is on the cusp of a changing world and is trying to retain as much power as he can. In trying to stick to his conservative and traditional ways, it actually makes him look a bit ridiculous because that is not what the world was anymore. It was changing, and he did not want to. He is also a working-class man, and he does not appear to be very well-educated. Even something like that shows a change in what a father is on television. Edith, however, keeps Archie in the image of the “man-of-the-house” because of her treatment of him and doing whatever he wants her to do.

In the 1980s The Cosby Show gives somewhat mixed messages to the competence and knowledge of the father. Bill Cosby portrayed a father who was a bit of a child and could be very goofy, yet, at the same time, he was a highly intelligent man as demonstrated by the fact that he was a doctor. This show almost goes back to the earlier sitcom days when fathers were more revered, but it has still given fathers a bit of a sillier appearance. Clair plays a part in giving Cliff a more childish appearance, as well, since she is a powerful woman. With her being a powerful working woman it adds to his childish nature.

All signs of competence seem to be lost upon the introduction of Homer Simpson. In The Simpsons, he is a father who does not know much at all. He is portrayed as dumb and bungling. In many respects, daughter Lisa may act more
adult-like than Homer himself does, and Marge is a much more responsible parent than Homer. It is astounding that in about thirty-years the father went from the representation of Ward Cleaver to that of Homer Simpson.

With *Boy Meets World* the father does again seem to be represented in a bit of a better light. He is not dumb and irresponsible in the way that Homer is, but he still does not really know what the best thing to do is. Alan Matthews definitely does not handle situations in the best way, but at least he is willing to take advice and listen to Amy who may know how to handle a situation better. This is similar to Ward and June, but Alan is probably a bit more of a problem than Ward.

In all these ways, father’s competence has been a little shaky. They are not as reliable in knowing the right thing to do at the right time. They are becoming more juvenile and less responsible as a father figure. The role of a father is becoming more of a mockery than that of a respected man. While competence levels may be going down, the level of caring in fathers has not seemed to change much, though. Throughout all of these shows fathers still seem to have loving and caring relationships with their families. There are both situations in which fathers are specifically doing things to take care of their families and situations in which they are just being a friend.

Ward Cleaver wrote Beaver’s poem for him. This was a mistake and Ward should not have done this, but his intentions were in the right place. His goal was to help Beaver, and, in the end, he still set things straight. Ward was responsible and fixed the problem that he caused because he cared about Beaver.
In the episode of *The Cosby Show*, Cliff does not have too much interaction with his family, but when he does he is busy teasing them. It is the way in which he does this that helps to demonstrate his care for his family. All of his teasing is for fun, almost in a loving way. He never intends to hurt or offend his family, and he just wants to have a good time.

Homer Simpson, because of his reputation as a moron, is probably not normally regarded as a caring father, but he can be. In the episode seen here, he does a few things that can be looked at as caring for his family. He sets up their vacation to the beach, and by doing that he gives his family time to spend together. It was also observed that he truly enjoyed getting a “compliment” from Lisa. And, like Cliff Huxtable, he teases his son for fun, but not to hurt him. It is interesting that Groening called *The Simpsons* “the anti-Cosby show,” because there seem to be some similarities in the personalities of these two fathers.

Alan Matthews is a very caring father. Yes, he makes mistakes. After all, he jumped out of a plane instead of talking to his son, but he still, overall, cares incredibly for his family. He does whatever he can to correct the problems that he causes, and he is willing to take advice from not only his wife, but from his neighbor, as well. Alan is an incredibly caring father that will do whatever he can to be the best father he can be.

The reason Archie Bunker is not being mentioned until now is because he is the only one on the list who does not seem to care that much about his family. He is a grumpy man who has an attitude problem. His family loves and cares about him,
and if it came down to it, Archie would probably say he loves them, too, but he does not show it. Besides the few times that he confides in Edith about his worries he does not really care for her in anyway, nor does he care for his daughter and son-in-law.

Fathers have changed, but not completely. In fact, the part that has stayed the same is the more important part. Maybe fathers are not as wise, as knowledgeable, or as competent as they once were, but they do still care. A father who knows best is not enough. A father who cares best is truly the best thing for his family. If a father cares, he will do whatever he can to do the right thing for them even if he does not know what it is on his own.

The television sitcom has certainly downplayed the role of the father. Rather than being respected and revered, he is made to look like an imbecile and be laughed at. Underneath it all, though, these men still have great character. They may suffer from being made a mockery of, but they care for there families, and will care for their families. As long as television continues to introduce caring fathers, the image of fatherhood will be somewhat safe. Once that goes, though, which may happen judging by their loss of respect, then America’s television sitcom families are in for trouble.
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