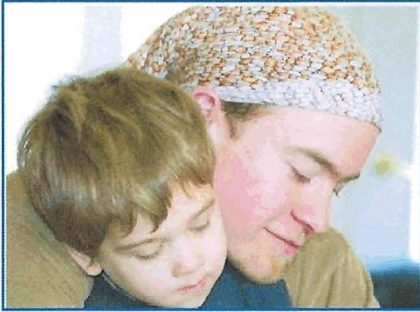


Yes, Men Can Raise Kids

June 4, 2010 by [Katie Presley](#) · 3 Comments



As feminists, we are keenly aware of the ways women are victimized and/or targeted by their surrounding cultures. We are often accused of having too many “politically correct” antennae up at one time. Donald Unger, in his new book *Men Can: The Changing Image and Reality of Fatherhood in America* (Temple University Press) would like to add another to our arsenal of sensors: the “fathers-ignored-as-caregivers” one. His book is a valuable introduction to issues of fatherhood and the changing landscape of the American two-income family, and his persistent engagement with feminist theory and the entire feminist project is compelling, if arguably imperfect.

So when *was* the last time you wondered if men’s bathrooms have changing tables? Would it bother you to hear that very few do? Unger begins his book by highlighting his successful effort to bring Mobil Oil into compliance with Connecticut and New York state laws by installing changing tables in men’s bathrooms along an oft-used freeway corridor. This is when *Men Can* is most readable: Unger engages with contemporary case law, or contemporary popular culture, to illustrate either a hopeful future for U.S. fatherhood or a frustrating backslide/stagnancy in parenting politics.

The book follows five U.S. families, all of which feature stay-at-home-dads, interspersed with chapters analyzing commercials, movies, TV shows and even language that have contributed, for better or worse, to our current conceptualization of fatherhood. The commercials will be familiar to anyone who watches TV (or [Sarah Haskins](#)’ scathing, hilarious satire): Unger calls them “pseudo-feminist” or “doofus dad” ads. They portray a man, presumably a father, failing miserably at parenting and other domestic tasks his (female) partner performs effortlessly. One of the more persistent and damaging stereotypes about fathers, the author argues, is that they wouldn’t know what to do with a baby if handed one—even one they lent a chromosome to! They might really love their kids, but they’re just bumbling *men*. Thankfully, an intelligent cultural counterpoint is offered by Unger in the chapter about [Kevin Hill](#), a thoughtful, drawn-from-life TV show that ran one season on UPN in 2004. It followed the eponymous bachelor as he “inherits” his cousin’s infant daughter after the cousin’s death and the disappearance of the baby’s mother. Unger is good at incorporating progressive references like *Hill* at just about the point that one starts to disagree with his defensive swings at the feminist movement and its perceived resistance to sharing the righteous-cause pie with men who are trying to redefine words and concepts like “to father,” “to mother” and “to parent.”

The point with which I connected most strongly is that *parenting* should be on the front burner of the American family. The men and women Unger interviewed for his case studies are most remarkable because they clearly engaged in the gender politics faced by parents before and during the rearing of their children. Rather than necessarily being progressive—one couple, though hesitant to use labels, is both conservative and Christian—these families are simply responsible parents. Yes, fathers should be more involved, and yes, they absolutely should receive more resources and credit as they do, but credit should come not because they are bravely stepping into land-mined women’s territory but because they are a full member of the most critical team a child has on his or her side. *Anyone* actively nurturing and rearing a child deserves all the support (s)he can get.

Above image from Creative Commons; attribution-share alike 3.0 unported