



In this Q&A, Temple University Press author Donald N.S. Unger describes how American families are changing when it comes to caring for their children



Men CAN: The Changing Image and Reality of Fatherhood in America
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Q: You state that the tide is beginning to turn regarding how we see fathers and how fathers seem themselves. What social, cultural and political forces have fomented this change?

A: One of the biggest drivers of change has been economics. It's now a well established norm that American women have careers. One of the headlines of the current economic downturn has been "Women Surpass Men in the Workforce." In 1950, a man could reject kids, cleaning, and housework by saying "I work hard all day in the salt mine and I deserve to be able to relax when I get home!" The answer today is, "We're both out toiling in the salt mines. How about if tonight you make dinner and we take turns relaxing?" On the socio-cultural side, of course, the Women's Movement has been the driving force—we might date the modern, egalitarian push to the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 (the year after I was born).

Q: You talk specifically about parenting, and how parents are represented in media. Why look at the film, television, and advertising for codes and cues for fatherhood?

A: Judith Butler has written a lot about gender (and sexuality) as a performance. In certain key ways, family is a performance and one that we learn. Most often and most deeply, you would expect that we learn how to "do family" from our families as we grow up. But given what contemporary America is like, given the prevalence of divorce, of blended families, of immigrant families, of regional and cultural differences within the country, our own families are often not a good enough "school" for us. So we look elsewhere—to the families of our spouses or friends, to political, cultural or religious groups, and to popular culture representations of families. In some ways, popular culture is *terribly* inaccurate in the way that it represents who we are and how we behave. But it provides us some interesting puzzle pieces, some broken mirror shards, some fun house chrome that reflects us in potentially useful ways. And, sometimes, of course, it is accurate. Sometimes we see ourselves very clearly reflected in ads, in movies, on TV. Sometimes that's good and sometimes it's sobering—and it can be a good conversation starter.

Q: Where did you find the real-life families you use as interview subjects in MEN CAN, and what was your criteria for selecting them?

A: I wanted both a range of families—people living in different situations, in different parts of the country; some ethnic, racial, and political diversity—and also a set of families that I felt would help tell the story of the changing family from a variety of angles. The first family I look at—the father became the stay-at-home parent in the 1970s; his son-in-law became the stay-at-home parent almost three decades later—had very strong progressive motivations. The last family I profile is quite conservative. I think that contrast is both instructive and important. It's easy to paint—sometimes to smear—stay-at-home fathers with a broad brush. But it's not accurate.

Q: You parse the language of fatherhood/parenting. Why are gendered and gender neutral terms so important in talking about parenting?

A: The classic example isn't even gendered: "My husband doesn't help enough in the house, and especially with the kids." You can pull that phrase out of a lot of divorce documents; dissatisfaction with who-does-what at home is high on the list of what breaks up marriages. But why use the word "help" there? What does that mean? Often, I would argue, what it means is many women want men to do more childcare, do more housework, but to do these things as we are instructed to do them: we should act like "the help." I'm open to any kind of mutually consensual domestic arrangement that people find functional and useful. There are women who see the home as their sphere of control and there are men who agree with that. In those situations, for men to be "put to work" under the supervision of women may work without a hitch. In more egalitarian households, however, and especially when it comes to how we deal with children, that model is "internally inconsistent." Women can't say to men, "you have the same domestic responsibilities that we have" and match that to "you never get these things right—gimme the baby!" A little too much push-pull. All of which, for me, comes back to the word "help." Unpacking language lets us see what we're doing—when we might not have been aware of what we were doing—and helps us begin to change.

Q: What is your family like—you write about your relationship with your daughter, but what about your wife? How does she interact with you and parenting?

A: I'm always something between leery of and put off by people who go into long, sappy dissertations about how wonderful their spouses are. But, both because of the amount of time we've been together (since around 1985) and because of the amount of time I've spent analyzing family and gender issues, I have certainly become more and more appreciative of how lucky I am in my own marriage. We have had in our favor the fact that we knew, from very early on, that both of us wanted to be active parents; she knew that I wanted to spend at least some time as the stay-at-home parent. So that's not something that we stumbled into. But the key thing my wife has done is to balance her own needs and feelings with my needs and feelings (and our daughters needs and feelings) and to balance short term issues against long term issues. In the first couple of years of our daughter's life, for example, my wife saw me do things as a parent that were anything from "not the way she would do them" to "things she thought were mistakes." But she realized early on that if her response was to intervene and correct, she would get short term satisfaction but, longer term, burden herself as the indispensable parent.

Q: You write in your introduction about getting Mobil Oil to install changing tables in the men's rooms at rest stops on the Merritt Parkway. How did you become such an activist?

A: My first grade teacher had this story about me telling the class about Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers and how, the following weekend, when she went to the local grocery store, there I was, six or seven years old, handing out leaflets about boycotting grapes and lettuce.

That said, I guess I think of myself less as an activist than as a critical person. I grew up asking Why? And that's something my family encouraged—just as I encourage this tendency in my daughter. Frankly, I'm also something of an irritable person; I have that chronic, pebble-in-your-shoe, *This is Not Right!* feeling. I try to channel that in directions that are constructive rather than just persnickety. When I had to change my daughter's diaper—repeatedly—on the back seat of the car, with the door open, in the snow, knowing that the rest stop women's room a few feet away had a changing table and that the men's room didn't, I certainly felt that this was unjust, that it was a gross failure to provide "equal facilities." But, from a purely functional perspective, I was cold, and my daughter was cold, and a changing table wasn't a cause for me, it was a necessity.

Q: Your book is a call to action of sorts for families—how can families find *function* in the observations and recommendations you present in your book?

A: I would point to three main things:

First, in the same way that people “outing themselves” has done a lot to move the gay civil rights movement forward, I think people need to be more open and publically vocal about how our families really work. I particularly bridle at the use of the phrase “Women's Issues” to describe family issues; that's one of the great contaminants in our political discourse. We need more men who are able and willing to stand up for children's issues.

Second, both for adults and for children, it's important that we become more analytical about gender and family representations. I'm not in favor of censorship and I'm irritated by political correctness, but I'm happy that my daughter can point to a bumbling father in a movie and identify him as the classic Doofus Dad caricature.

Finally, and again, both for children and adults, we need more open discussion within families about the roles that we are choosing or the roles that we are forging for ourselves. Most of the college students I encounter, when I teach Gender Studies seminars have no real idea of how they are going to balance work and family. It isn't that there is one model or that talking about these things is easy, fast, and neat. But we need to talk about these things more. I hope I've provided a variety of ways into those conversations.

Q: Much of what you say in the book about parenting are things women have known—and been doing—for years. Do you think women can learn something from reading *MEN CAN*?

A: I'm beginning to see women acknowledge, talk about, wrestle, and come to terms with the nuances (and some of the pitfalls) of either sharing parenting or being the primary breadwinner. I think, for a lot of women, these sorts of changes initially seemed like unalloyed goods. I think both of those things are good. But they can be hard too. Some women are starting to acknowledge feeling intruded upon in the domestic sphere. Do you want help or do you want sharing? Either is fine, but it takes some negotiating. Some women revel in their growing economic power. Others are beginning to suffer the same pangs that male heads of households have felt:

My job is eating all the time I used to have for my family!

The pressure of being the main source of income is crushing!

Can I really respect a man who stays home and does the domestic work?

Isn't that kind of. . . unmanly, even lazy?

I hope that my book will help spark and open up some of those conversations. It's a complicated domestic landscape and we've lost some of the traditional peg points we've had to hold things in place. That's confusing and sometimes difficult. But freedom is a good problem to have.