

A Reading Guide for:

Men Can: The Changing Image & Reality of Fatherhood in America By Donald N.S. Unger

Further Information: <http://men-can.com>

Questions, Suggestions, Corrections: questions@men-can.com

Chapter One: Ángel Nieto: The Leading Edge of Change

“When Ángel assumed the role of stay-at-home parent for his eldest daughter, Alicia, in the early 1970s and subsequently for his second daughter, Marisa, who was born in 1976 and whom the Nietos adopted when she was six months old, he wasn’t on the cusp of a wave of change. Rather, he was on the wave’s leading edge. Now in retirement, taking care of his granddaughter Jazmyne, he is going around again.” (Pg. 19)

“Like his father-in-law, Celso Lopez is from Spain. He was born in Cádiz, on the southwest coast, the oldest of five brothers. His father was a naval officer. When Celso was in his teens, his mother opened a flamenco academy, one of the first women in the area to work outside the home, to start her own business. Although his education was mostly business oriented, he has largely worked as a teacher in the United States. When we met, he was staying home with his two daughters full-time and Celsito was in day care. Alicia was teaching middle school Spanish in Amherst.” (Pg. 24)

“In 1993, Scholastic brought out a short children’s book that Ángel had written, with illustrations by Stephanie O’Shaughnessy, called *El Machinchar*:² *Diálogo en Dos Voces*. Written in lyrical, rhyming Spanish, it tells the story of an unnamed father and his daughter, Alicia. The father has style problems; he doesn’t much care how he looks, and he doesn’t have much of a sense of what goes with what. When he walks down the street—he tells us and an illustration shows us—people stare in amazement as he passes by; even infants and animals are aghast.” (Pg. 29)

Questions:

1. How much does money have to do with who does childcare?
2. Do you feel like it makes you (would make you) less of a man to be the stay-at-home parent?
3. How open are you (would you be) with friends and family about being an active father?
4. What kinds of images of family do you want your child to see/not see in books?

¹ May only be used with attribution and for non-commercial purposes.

² *Machinchar* is *Spanglish* for the “Matching Chart” the daughter makes to help the father dress himself more appropriately.

Chapter Two: The Problem of Language: Can Fathers *Mother*?

“In the end, it is likely that the language of the domestic sphere will succumb to the same changes that have affected the professional sphere, both facilitating and mirroring change: The presence of female *policemen* lent weight to the movement to use the phrase *police officer*; the revival of that usage made it easier for girls to picture themselves growing up to do that job. In the same way, the “seepage” of men into domestic roles will likely spur language usage that will both acknowledge and validate contemporary domestic reality and create linguistic windows that enable boys to picture—and to *name*—a future for themselves in which they too are permitted, even encouraged, to nurture.” (Pg. 53)

Questions:

1. When you were growing up, what roles did you picture yourself in as a parent?
2. Is “to mother” the same as “to father” the same as “to parent”? If not, how are they different?
3. What has the word “home” meant to you, growing up? What would you like the word to mean to your child?
4. How do you define family? What elements are necessary for a group of people do be considered family?

Chapter Three: Tom Andrejev:³ The Matter of Trust

“Tom’s first post-college career was as a marketing executive in the rail freight industry. Then he took twelve years off to stay home and take care of his children full-time. In the summer of 2006, feeling that they were old enough for him to go back to work, Tom took another job in the industry, in a rather different area: as a freight train conductor, riding the rails and working the yards instead of riding a desk. Little more than a year later, he went back to being a stay-at-home dad.” (Pg. 56)

Questions:

1. Can men be trusted with children to the same degree that women are trusted? Why or why not?
2. Are you (would you be) comfortable being one of the only men in a group of mothers?
3. What do you do (would you do) to make yourself—and those mothers—more comfortable with your presence?
4. If you were to take time off work to care for your child, what kinds of skills might you bring back to the workplace?

Chapter Four: TV Dads: One Step Forward and Two Steps Back

“Not as lucky were the hapless fathers who appeared in the six, hour-long episodes of the short-lived NBC reality show *Meet Mr. Mom*, in which mothers were whisked off to spa

³ At the request of the family, pseudonyms were used in this chapter.

vacations so that the audience could see the kind of hilarity that ensues when men are put in charge of children. They had all kinds of curves thrown at them, including the addition of a llama and a goat to an impromptu children's party." (Pg. 71)

"The title character and the story set-up for *Kevin Hill* tweak that formula in some interesting directions: An African American lawyer living in New York City (Taye Diggs), educated, successful, stylish, and romantically busy, "inherits" the ten-month-old daughter of his closest cousin when the cousin suddenly dies. The child's mother is a drug-addicted stripper who can't be found; other family members are too old to take on an infant." (Pg. 75)

Questions:

1. What TV images of fathers have you seen that you like? What TV images of fathers have you seen that you dislike?
2. Do you feel that fathers in a group you identify with—race, class, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation—are represented accurately and treated fairly on TV?
3. Does it matter that many or most stay-at-home dads on TV are in that role involuntarily?
4. Do you find the *Doofus Dad* image on TV embarrassing? Does this change what you are or are not willing to do as a parent?

Chapter Five: Darryl Smith: Recovering Our Own Fathers

"... In addition to thinking about, and working on, what kind of *father* he wanted to be, Darryl also thought about what kind of *son* he wanted to be and about how he might create a healthier future by healing the past.

I believe that the actions that he has taken on both of these fronts—and, just as important, his reasons for taking them—form an important strand in the explanation of the role many American men of our generation are now playing in the lives of our children." (Pg. 97)

Questions:

1. How would you describe your relationship with your own father (or father figure): When you were growing up? At the present time?
2. In what ways is your father a model/anti-model for you?
3. How do you want your child to see you as a father: At the present time? In the future?
4. What concrete steps could you take to heal your own family's past?

Chapter Six: Poppins versus Kramer: Dad, You Have Really Changed!

"What we most often remember [about the movie *Mary Poppins*] is that the children's *circumstances* are changed. But the *character* who undergoes the most radical change over the course of the film is the father—with the mother a distant second. And, although one rather doubts that this is what the 'high concept pitch' to Walt Disney himself sounded like, we can compress the story into this somewhat odd sentence: Magical nanny descends on middle-class house hold in Edwardian England and induces a psychotic break in the father, converting him from a cold and distant bureaucrat to a nurturing parent." (Pg. 114)

“Ted Kramer (Dustin Hoffman) isn’t nudged into the role of primary parent; he’s thrown headlong, in the opening beats of *Kramer vs. Kramer*. He comes home late from the office, clearly a regular occurrence, and his wife Joanna (Meryl Streep) is waiting for him, suitcase in hand.

Here are my keys, my credit cards, my checkbook, and she is out the door and gone, their son, Billy (Justin Henry), asleep in his bedroom, the walls a skyscape spattered with the clouds that she painted for him. The child awakens the next morning to a radically altered domestic landscape; he is in the care of an instant single father.” (Pg. 121)

Questions:

1. What kind of relationship do you have (expect to have) with the mother of your child?
2. Is caring for a child compatible with keeping a job?
3. Do you respect men who either cut back on work or quit their jobs to care for their children?
4. If your relationship to your child is court-supervised, do you feel that supervision has been fair: to the child, to the mother, to you?

Chapter Seven: Ronnie Huang:⁴ What If We *Don’t* Put Him in Day Care?

“Day-care slots at good facilities—then, as always—were tight. And they had started both searching and researching during Eva’s pregnancy. They had decided where they wanted to send Lucius and had been wait-listed. A space opened up about four weeks before they were ready, and they put down a deposit.

And then—the day before Lucius was to start day care—his parents thought: *Why?*

Why should they have a child and then almost immediately shunt him off into the care of other people?

If they *didn’t* want to do that, what were their other options?

First and foremost: Would they still be able to pay the mortgage if one of them stopped bringing in an income?” (Pg. 147)

Questions:

1. If you decided not to use, or couldn’t find, daycare for your child, would you assume that the mother would be the one to stay home?
2. Are there ways you think women are more “natural” parents?
3. Do you feel like there are biological limits to the kind of parent you can be?
4. Are there ways you’ve tried to “make up for” being a man, to make yourself a better, or more acceptable, father?

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Chapter Eight: TV Commercials and the New American Family

“The [Honda Accord] commercial is chock-a-block with additional details that tell us what men are like with babies, and I’ll hit just a few of them quickly.

The baby is being put into the car in a shirt and diaper: no pants, no socks, no shoes. The father isn’t carrying a diaper bag: no diapers, no wipes, no bottle—*that’s* going to be a fun trip for everybody and soon. Finally, disposable diapers tend to have the absorbent layer on the inside and an impermeable cover on the outside; we have reason to wonder whether or not ‘whoever diapered the child’ put the diaper on inside-out.” (Pg. 165)

Questions:

1. Do you feel like the images of fathers you see in commercials are mostly accurate or inaccurate?
2. When you see images of incompetent fathers in commercials, do you find that entertaining, irritating, irrelevant?
3. Do you (would you) talk to your child about how commercials represent fathers (families, parents, mothers)? What do you (would you) say?
4. Is it necessary for women to feel superior to men as parents?

Chapter Nine: Kevin Knussman: The Trooper Dad

“In 1995, Howard Kevin Knussman became the first man to allege gender discrimination in the interpretation of the FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act], over the state’s refusal to give him leave to take care of his family after his wife, Kim, gave birth to Paige, having suffered complications that required her to be hospitalized for the preceding two weeks, and then came home in a debilitated condition.

Jill Mullineaux, the personnel manager of the Maryland State Police, couched the refusal this way: ‘Unless your wife is in a coma or dead, you can’t be primary care provider’ (and thus, to her way of thinking, eligible for family leave).

She reasoned, ‘You must be able to breast-feed a baby in order to be declared a primary care [PC] provider, and since you can’t breastfeed, you can’t possibly be a PC provider.’” (Pg. 178)

Questions:

1. Should men and women have different rights to time off from work as parents?
2. Do you know what rights you have, as a father, under the federal Family & Medical Leave Act? Under the laws of your state? Under the rules of your employer?
3. Do you feel it is (would be) “safe” for you to exercise any of these rights? Why or why not?
4. How essential is breastfeeding to childcare? Is it possible for a working woman to breastfeed her baby?

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About the Book

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In *Men Can*, writer, teacher, and father Donald Unger uses his personal experiences, stories of real-life families, as well as representations of fathers in film, on television, and in advertising, to illuminate the role of men in the increasingly fluid domestic sphere.

Critical Praise: *“Unger’s on target in Men CAN. He takes on uncomfortable questions that spin off from a major social transformation. He deftly describes an emerging ethic that benefits children, mothers, and fathers. This is a wise book, with a wry sense of humor, that profiles men who are literally changing what fathering means. Men CAN should be read by those who care about the modern family.”*

**[Haji Shearer](#), Director, [Fatherhood Initiative](#)
*Massachusetts Children’s Trust Fund***

“Fatherhood is evolving. In Men CAN, Donald Unger tells the story of that evolution in ways that are warm, personal, and compelling. The picture that emerges is a hopeful one, but it will also be helpful and comforting to men and women struggling with new roles at home.”

[Jeremy Adam Smith](#), author, *The Daddy Shift*; editor [shareable.net](#)

Excerpts: [English](#); [Spanish](#)

Author Bio: Don Unger currently teaches in the [Program in Writing & Humanistic Studies](#) at MIT; writes about the representation of men, masculinity, and fatherhood in popular culture; does business journalism for [Knowledge@Wharton](#) and its affiliated sites; has a (dormant) [blog](#) on environmental issues.

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