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Rewriting the How-To of Parenting: What Is Really Modern about ABC's Modern Family

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Since its first airing in 2009, ABC's domestic comedy, *Modern Family*, has received much praise for its formal innovations. Inspired by reality TV, the one-camera style mockumentary crosscuts between quirky portrayals of three related families, rendering its various storylines by means of jagged camera movements that capture the comic quotidian in three modern California homes. The fast-paced domestic scenes are interlaced with confessionals in which the family members, sometimes alone and sometimes partnered, step outside the action to create an intimate rapport with the audience, supplying additional jokes, plot complements, and insight into feelings and motives from their stationary position on a couch. Characters' intermittent direct gazes into the camera punctuate this rhythm, and each episode ties up with a voice-over whose saccharine sentimentality provides a counterbalance to the show's edgy jokes and risky, nontraditional elements.

Co-created by producers Steven Levitan and Christopher Lloyd, the series clearly introduces non-mainstream material: there is the gay couple, Mitchell Pritchett (Jesse Tyler Ferguson) and Cameron Tucker (Eric Stonestreet), who have adopted an Asian girl named Lily (Jaden and Ella Hiller, later Aubrey Anderson-Emmons). Mitch is the grown son of the show's patriarch, Jay Pritchett (Ed O'Neill), who has formed a blended family with his second and much younger Colombian trophy-wife, Gloria (Sofia Vergara), her son from another marriage, Manny Delgado (Rico Rodriguez), and, in later seasons, the couple's infant boy, Joe (first unnamed twins, later Pierce Wallace, and yet later Jeremy McGuire). Finally and far more traditionally, there is Claire Dunphy (Julie Bowen), Jay's other grown child and Mitch's older sister, and her husband, Phil (Ty Burrell), together with their boy-crazy teenaged daughter, Haley (Sarah Hyland), their brainiac second daughter, Alex (Ariel Winter), and their clumsy-sweet youngest child, Luke (Nolan Gould).

Modern Family is, as Emily Nussbaum notes, superbly paced and balanced: “The show’s tricky mandate is to merge the heartfelt with the incisive, often within a single scene” (Nussbaum, 2010). She describes the tonal balance in terms of, for instance, both upending and embracing stereotypes, punctuating drama with pratfalls, and diving deep into emotions but stopping “one beat before treacle.” Even the variations on traditional gender roles and the traditional family structure are measured. Whereas some critics see Jay and Gloria’s history of divorce and especially Mitch and Cam’s homosexuality as a poisonous assault on family values, most seem to agree that the show actually reinforces tradition despite the unconventional make-up of two of its families. As Spencer Kornhaber observes, “The show became one of the few cross-culturally appealing TV works of the Obama years, viewed in red and blue states, name-checked by Ann Romney and the president alike” (Kornhaber, 2015). Advocates of family values who believe that the nuclear family is the only stable foundation for a thriving society indeed have little to worry about: as reflected by its popularity among Republican and Democratic viewers alike, the show’s transformations of deeply entrenched patterns associated with the nuclear family are little more than cosmetic surface peels. *Modern Family*, as we will see, continually reifies the nuclear family even as it reorganizes its structure. The spirit and values of the nuclear family are unbroken and celebrated in each of its episodes.

Reassuring even its most conservative viewers on this count, the show does, however, portray an unconventional and potentially unsettling approach to parenting. In *Modern Family*, every parent parents, every parent is faithful to the family, and every parent is present, but the dynamics of parenting are unstable, shifting from character to character and from situation to situation. Parenting is not aligned with any particular philosophy. It bends gender rules and disregards tacit boundaries normally set by age, race, and social class. While one major

contribution of the show is that it never questions the necessity of parental presence—that all parents should be involved goes without saying for all three *Modern Family* households—an even greater value lies in the latitude it offers parents in their roles and interactions with children. The parenting we witness is a self-contradictory, sometimes ineffectual, sometimes childish, and often unstable affair. It is a set of actions and reactions that continually question contemporary ideals for raising children, stretching the seemingly immutable laws of good parenting to create a kind of parenting continuum that includes many risky, non-normative behaviors but that, as a result, allows each parent the possibility of re-defining what it means to raise and love a child. However haphazard, comic, provisional, and chaotic in appearance, such parenting takes a tremendous burden off the shoulders of viewer-parents and, particularly, viewer-mothers who, in a climate that equates the decline of family values with the failure of society as a whole, are culturally mandated to be unshakeable sources of stability, consistency, and guidance. Before and upon giving birth, women receive a vast and complex mothering script which, though unwritten, unmistakably spells out what real mothering and good children are. If they or their children fall short, they are the first targets of blame. *Modern Family* offers a new script, for its episodes and our society. The parenting we see here is not always directly related to children's welfare and success and never hinges on parents' ability to follow a protocol not their own. Fathers and especially mothers are granted leeway to approach parenting and family according to their individual abilities and limitations.

Cameron, Mitchell, and Lily and the Virtues of Ineffectual Parenting

Much of the discussion surrounding Mitch Pritchett and Cam Tucker has focused on the degree to which they resemble “normal” heterosexual couples despite being gay. Although some

conservative voices, such as the American Family Association's Bryan Fischer, have asserted that shows like *Modern Family* are slowly killing our culture and that "same-sex parenting. . . is a form of child abuse," most viewers, as well as the creators of the series, classify its portrayal of homosexuality and gay parenting as heteronormative ("*Modern Family*" Is "Poison," 2014). Granted, the Tucker-Pritchetts take considerable liberties with traditional gender codes. Cam is a flamboyant, nurturing stay-at-home caregiver but also a burly ex-football player, while Mitch is a practical breadwinner whose much smaller frame expresses less the mentality of a cut-throat lawyer than the disposition of an overprotective worry-wart. It is also true that Mitch and Cam, for a while, take turns assuming the roles of husband/dad and wife/mom. However, by the end of season 1, as Alexander Doty notes, "the show ha[s] put the normative back into their homo(s), with Mitchell admitting his lack of interest in domestic work and Cameron confessing that he wants Mitchell to 'get a job so I can go back to being a stay-at-home dad and trophy wife'" ("*Flow Remembers*," 2012). Doty describes the characters as "'good' gays who keep their 'place at the table' by striving to be just like their straight middle-class counterparts, living in a monogamous relationship and building up a (mildly dysfunctional) family that includes a stay-at-home 'mom' and a working 'dad.'"

Doty adds that there are ways in which Mitch and Cam cannot simply be gay counterparts to, say, the straight couple Claire and Phil because they hardly ever show open physical affection and because they are not married. But it should be noted that scenes reaching beyond the most timid or silly allusions to sexuality are studiously kept out of all three households, a fact that the very few innocuous pecks exchanged between Mitch and Cam, seen in "The Kiss" (season 2, episode 2) for the first time, only confirms. Moreover, in season 5 ("The Wedding, Part 1" and "The Wedding, Part 2," episodes 23 and 24) Mitch and Cam do marry

once gay marriage has been legalized in California, where the show is set. This further aligns the couple with the heteronormative models of the other two families. Indeed, having the two gay men marry on screen has been an ideal way for the show to seem progressive—gay men are marrying—while remaining on safe conservative ground—they are, after all, marrying. It has given the writers the opportunity to mine the marriage industry for what would normally be a worn and tired storyline but that now appears fresh and gay. Christina LaVecchia has pointed out that the show at most “remediates our idealized, heteronormative vision of what families *look* like, and not their actual function” (LaVecchia, 2011). Katherine Rosman similarly argues that for all of Cam’s overdrawn dramatic gestures and the many gay stereotypes to which both he and Mitch play, they are the most normal of the lot, simple parents trying to survive parenthood. Rosman goes so far as to state that *Modern Family* “harks back to ‘The Cosby Show,’ which was revolutionary in portraying an upper-middle-class black family as an upper-middle-class family that just happened to be black” (Rosman, 2010). Cam and Mitch epitomize the ideal of upwardly mobile, monogamous, suburban family stability.

Their homosexuality, then, seems incidental. While it is heartening that gay couples get to stay on network television for more than six seasons, the way in which Mitch and Cam are represented does little to shake the series’ claim to conservative family entertainment. What does upset the status quo, however, is the unconventional role written for their adoptive daughter, Lily. Once Lily becomes a real screen presence in season 3, when her baby character, played by twins Jaden and Ella Hiller, is replaced with Aubrey Anderson-Emmons, she is instantly transformed into a miniature grown-up who makes her own decisions and self-regulates her language, behavior, and development.

In “Little Bo Bleep” (season 3, episode 13), Lily is at home with her two fathers. As she rehearses for her part as the flower girl in a wedding, Lily uses the f-word:

Cam [demonstrating how to throw and how not to throw flower petals]: And it’s this, and it’s this. Not this, but this.

Mitch: Okay. Okay, that’s good, Cam.

Cam: And this.

Mitch: Save. . . let’s save some petals for Lily, all right? Okay, honey.

Cam [to Lily]: Let’s do it over here, sweetheart.

Mitch: Okay.

Cam: There you go. Like you’re coming down the aisle.

Mitch: Yeah. Yeah.

Cam: Okay. Not too many at once.

Mitch: You’re doing great, Lil.

Cam: Oh she is, isn’t she?

Mitch: Forget the bride. All the eyes are gonna be on her.

Lily [dropping the flower basket]: Oh, f***

[Cam whimpers, snickers, and finally breaks out in laughter and leaves the room. Mitch remains, silent and open-mouthed.]

Mitch [joining Cam in a different room]: I cannot believe you laughed!

Cam: Oh, I am sorry. But you know I have two weaknesses: children cursing and old people rapping.

Mitch: Cam, we have to tell her it’s a bad word.

Cam: No. That just gives it more power. The less we make of it, the better. Let's just pretend like it never happened.

Mitch: Okay, well, maybe it, maybe it didn't. Maybe we, maybe we misheard.

Cam: Yeah. Maybe she said "truck" . . . or--or "duck." Or "luck." She could've said "yuck."

Lily: Daddy, can I have some ice cream?

Mitch: No, honey, if you're hungry, you can have some fruit.

Lily: Fruit. F****

Cam [laughing and exiting]: Oh, God!

Mitch [exasperated]: I have two children.

[Lily giggles.]

Lily's fathers never forbid her to use the f-word, despite Mitch's feelings, but neither do they pretend that nothing happened, as Cam would have it. Lily witnesses Cam's laughter and Mitch's outrage, but nothing that might be conventionally recognized as a "parenting moment" has taken place. In the best-selling book *The Five Love Languages of Children*, many ideas, such as the importance of performing regular favors for one's children, are debatable. However, few parents would argue with the advice that "To train your child in mind and character to become a self-controlled and constructive member of home and community" parents must "employ guidance by example, modeling, verbal instruction, written request, teaching and preaching right behavior, correcting wrong behavior, providing learning examples, and much more" (Chapman and Campbell, 1997: pg. 119). Cam and Mitch communicate with Lily in very few of these ways, but such omissions notwithstanding, Lily refrains from using the f-word or similar expletives in future episodes. While Mitch and Cam drop their chins in disbelief, throw up their hands in

helplessness, or dissolve in unrestrained laughter, Lily is not at all at a loss and simply proceeds with life and language as she sees fit. Though not particularly comfortable to parent-viewers because they involve a total loss of parental control and replace firmly defined roles for parents with something bordering on rolelessness, Mitch and Cam's fumbling attempts at guiding Lily are a radical revision of received scripts, both traditional and modern, about the parent-child relationship. They go beyond the idea that parents can mold their children, and they go beyond liberal approaches that promote "peerenting," or befriending one's children, by refusing to buy into power divisions and hierarchies between the young and the mature. In a recurrent formula that can be traced throughout the show's seasons, again and again Mitch and Cam attempt to have a parenting moment with Lily only to see that moment eclipsed by the unshakeable reality that Lily will be Lily. She has either long understood and made up her mind about the issue at hand, or she will—without her parents. Mitch ends the scene on the exasperated note that he has "two children," further highlighting that he cannot shape Lily's behavior any more than Cam's.

Lily needs Mitch and Cam to feed, shelter, and clothe her and to take her places, but as evidenced by their continued efforts to remove themselves from their daughter's earshot in order to discuss the parenting they ultimately fail to carry out, her two fathers play no traditional part in her emotional development. In season 6, Lily is only seven, but she far surpasses all parent figures in dealing with Gloria and Jay's baby, Joe. While Gloria cannot wean him from his pacifier ("Closet? You'll Love It!" season 6, episode 17), Mitch and Cam, in charge of babysitting, so lose control that Joe all but wrecks their home. Lily, by contrast, not only remains quite composed about all the attention Joe receives but proves to be the only one able to occupy him in a calm and non-destructive way ("Integrity," season 6, episode 21). Her fathers have certainly not taught her about coping mechanisms for jealousy or about chaos control since they

themselves know nothing about them, yet she is perfectly equipped to handle the situation. To be sure, there are flaws in her character and attitude that need to be worked on, but the show presents these issues as beyond Mitch and Cam's reach. If they are raising Lily, they are doing so by methods unclear to them and unrecognizable to the most progressive parent-viewer. In this way, one of the funniest aspects of the show, Mitch and Cam's helplessness in the face of almost any parental challenge tossed their way, becomes one of the show's most radical statements, the conviction that children are their own people, and it matters a little what parents say or do.

At the end of "Best Men" (season 4, episode 17), Lily demonstrates her understanding of adult conversation and complex psychosocial dynamics, an understanding for which her fathers can take neither credit nor responsibility. Mitch, Cam, their best friend Sal, and Sal's new husband want to celebrate the marriage at Mitch and Cam's home. Sal is still in her wedding gown and sits down on the couch next to Lily, who is playing with a toy mirror and applying lipstick. The male adults tend to drinks and games, which presents an opportunity for Lily and Sal to have an exchange:

Mitch: I'm going to go pop the champagne and get some glasses.

Sal: Yeah!

Sal's new husband: I'll help!

Cam: I'm going to get Cranium!

Sal [alone to Lilly, unenthusiastically]: Hey.

Lily [unenthusiastically]: Hey.

Sal: Sorry you couldn't come to the wedding. It was no kids.

Lily: It's okay. I'll go to your next one.

Sal [deflated and incredulous]: Wow. . .

Mitch [from an adjacent room]: She just, she just means when she's not a kid anymore.

Lily: She knows what I mean.

Sal [whispering to Lily]: I don't like you.

Lily [quickly whispering her retort]: I'll get over it.

[Sal knocks the toy mirror out of Lily's hands upon which Lily frowns.]

This scene portrays a conflict between females of vastly differing ages that positions them on a par. One is in a white wedding gown symbolizing her arrival at the pinnacle of womanhood, while the other is dressed in pink, merely playing at being a woman as she primps with her plastic toys. Yet both use very similar language in this exchange and react with the same degree of maturity and with similar facial expressions. Granted, Sal is an impulsive character whose main goal in life seems to be to party; these traits reduce the gap between adult and child in this scene. However, she is very clearly a physically superior white adult who launches a verbal and semi-physical attack on a small Asian child by proclaiming not to like her and subsequently hitting the mirror out of her hand. Lily's character, here or elsewhere, does not elicit or demand adult protectiveness, whether in the form of shelter from the harsh realities surrounding marital relationships or distance from an annoyed and inebriated adult. Lily, though temporarily on her own with Sal, does not come across as helpless. She comprehends that she is in no real danger and that a frown will suffice as a reaction to a lost mirror and an unkind remark. She also grasps the reality of divorce and remarriage and, moreover, correctly recognizes all the signs of an unstable spouse in Sal.

Mitch and Cam are merely on the sidelines of this scene and of Lily's maturation in general. Parenting, for them, is not a matter of imposing their will, instilling values, or even negotiating. It is ineffectual, not in the sense that it is bad or ineffective but in the sense that it simply does not happen within any norms that are readily recognizable to them or their viewers. It follows, the show suggests importantly, that Lily will develop her sexuality on her own terms in due time; her gay parents will have no influence on where she will situate herself on the spectrum of sexuality. If anything, Lily tends toward traditional gender identification if her pink Halloween outfit in "Open House of Horrors" (season 4, episode 5) and the yellow Belle costume she selects in "Other People's Children" (season five, episode 17) are any indication. But that, too, is an unstable assumption. Neither reassuring homophobic viewers that gayness is not always perpetuated throughout generations nor saying the opposite, *Modern Family's* radical statement consists in its refusal to link parents' habits, appearance, patterns, attitudes, and values to their children's. Parenting is, instead, a matter of processing and accepting the differences of another, much younger individual.

The show's argument that Mitch and Cam cannot control the outcome of Lily's identity has an important bearing on mothers in particular. As the predominant primary caregivers for children, mothers are the first to be blamed if the development of their children deviates from the norm. A mother's inability to steer and form her children to suit societal expectations is quickly traced to maternal pathology, character defect, and moral inadequacy. If a child appears queer in any sense of the term, the mother is vilified and perceived to have made the wrong choices. She is branded as someone who has mismanaged her influence and who has thereby not only failed her child but let down society as a whole: her ill-raised, deviant child will, so the subtext of this politics of blame reads, perpetuate the reprehensible effect its mother had. The overwhelming

sense of shame that is generated by a culture that seeks to attribute a child's every trait and behavior to agential choices made by its mother is something most mothers who fall short of achieving the social standards for their children's appearance, performance, and behavior feel; indeed, even mothers who fit in and whose children fit in feel it regularly. This culturally induced shame is especially acute when it comes to the physical welfare of children. If a child is obese or born with a birth defect, for instance, society points its finger at the mother first. Mitch and Cam, in *Modern Family*, on the other hand, deflect and undermine the power of maternal guilt and blame: the show argues not only that we would be hard-pressed to identify whom exactly we could blame for anything Lily is or becomes—a mother? a father? which father?—but, more importantly, that Lily is perfectly happy and safe developing on her own, as her own person. If it is not clear that a primary caregiver is responsible for the way a child turns out, then, the series posits, the question of whom to blame for an outcome perceived as negative is far more complicated than we thought. The characters of Mitch and Cam suggest that if we are ready to invest the role of the primary caregiver with less control and influence, then we can begin to build our defenses against the cultural assault that is parental and, far more often, maternal shaming.

Gloria, Jay, and Manny and the Virtues of Collaborative Parenting

The second couple in the extended modern family is made up of Jay Pritchett, his much younger bombshell wife, Gloria Delgado, and Manny Delgado, who moves from pre-teen to teen-age years as the show's seasons progress. Later, Gloria becomes pregnant, and baby Joe joins the household. This family is not nuclear since both Jay and Gloria have been married before and since Manny stems from Gloria's previous marriage. Gloria is also several decades

younger than Jay, making her younger than her stepdaughter, Claire, the older of Jay's two children. One might argue that young trophy wives hardly challenge the norms of the family anymore and that divorce is commonplace, but the fact that Gloria is Colombian and hails from a low-class inner-city illegal-immigrant culture affords the potential for seriously upsetting family ideals. However, as with Cam and Mitch, that potential is never realized; instead, Gloria's race and class differences are, very unrealistically, reduced to idiosyncrasies that constitute the basis for many a joke. Gloria is quirky, but her conventional beauty, relative youth, and newly acquired wealth securely position her in the arena of mainstream values and erase all serious boundaries and differences her background could have brought. Gloria dresses differently than most moms, and she is, despite an occasional pose at the stove or with her baby, far less domestic than many moms. She is also different in that she offers some cultural enrichment by calling attention to her background, cultivating a strong accent, and regularly introducing foreign idioms and customs. But her character is quickly defined as something that merely seems like a new family element, seemingly forming a new family model. As Bruce Feiler writes, "the roiling topics of politics and religion are kept off the Thanksgiving table"; despite the occasional slur directed at "her people" that Jay utters under his breath, the Delgado-Pritchett home, like the other two homes in the show, is hardly a battleground for politics of any kind (Feiler, 2011). Instead of asking difficult questions about divorce and the vast difference in age, class, and race between Gloria and Jay, the show's writers opt for a surface treatment of otherness that offers ample opportunity for stereotyping and rich fodder for humorous reenactments of received normative patterns. Despite all of Gloria's differences and despite all the differences that mark her new family, the principal characteristics of the Delgado-Pritchett household are spousal fidelity and filial loyalty within the context of a beautiful domestic environment that,

incidentally, appears to clean itself. However unorthodox in appearance, Jay and Gloria's arrangement does little to vary on the well-recognized ideas of what constitutes a good family.

As with Lily, it is Manny, and the parenting strategies and omissions he inspires, that constitutes the show's true contribution to new thoughts about the concept of family. Some of the dynamics seem very normal: Manny is a mama's boy half the time, though it is clear that this is mostly cultivated by Gloria and not Manny. Both mother and stepfather are there for him: she and Jay support him vigorously at all of his sports events; in "En Garde" (season 1, episode 7) they even go to his fencing tournament wearing t-shirts that read "Who Da Manny." Gloria babies and advocates for Manny at every turn, and in the occasional moments during which she is confrontational with her son—as when, in the same episode, she tries to instill in him a respect for women after he tries to get out of fencing against a girl, or when she teaches him and Luke a lesson after catching them drinking ("Grill, Interrupted," season 6, episode 19)—she clearly has his best interests at heart. Jay expresses his concern for Manny far less effusively than Gloria and is often condescending and dismissive. He is the gruff stepfather who mocks both the stepson he sees as spoiled and the mother he views as overbearing, but he spares Manny many an embarrassment at school, coaches him in the skill of fitting in among his peers, and is to Manny, in fact, the protective and caring father he never was to his own children, Claire and Mitch.

"The Bicycle Thief" (season 1, episode 3) demonstrates this traditionally paternal side in Jay very clearly. Stepfather and stepson have just experienced some considerable tension; neither is dealing well with the new reality of living under one roof; Manny misses his absentee father, Javier, and blames Jay for his unhappiness. Jay, hardly happy about having to share Gloria with Manny, nevertheless comes through for him when Javier, who has promised his son a trip to Disneyland, stands him up:

Jay [in his house, pouring himself a drink after his fight with Manny, answering a phone call from Javier]: Hello, hey Javier. Manny's waiting for you outside. . . . What? Why not? Hold that thought.

Jay [taking a swig of his drink, continuing in voiceover, then speaking directly into the camera]: His son's sitting on a curb, waiting to go to Disneyland, and Superman can't drag himself away from a craps table . . . and I'm the jerk.

Jay [walking out to join Manny at the curb and sitting down next to him]: Say, listen. I uh— Sorry, but I got some bad news.

Manny: What?

Jay: Your dad couldn't make it.

Manny [deeply disappointed]: Why not?

Jay: The plane was full . . . and this old lady needed to get home, so he gave up his seat.

Manny: You're making that up, aren't you?

Jay: No.

Manny: He just didn't want to come.

Jay: Are you kidding me? He was very upset. He was dying to see you. [A vehicle approaches.]

In fact, look what he sent.

Manny: A limo?

Jay: Yeah! He wanted me and your mom to take you to Disneyland.

Manny [elated]: I told you he was an awesome dad.

Jay [smiling]: Yeah, he's a prince.

Here and in many other scenes, Jay intervenes to save Manny from hurt and humiliation. He may not like the manner in which Manny came to him “kind of fully cooked,” as he puts it in “Other People’s Children” (season 5, episode 17), and he certainly does not like how Manny was cooked: in “Coal Digger” (season 1, episode 5), Claire captures Jay’s feelings perfectly when she mockingly notes that Manny “wears aftershave” and “dresses like a count.” But Manny is now his charge, for better or worse, and his sometimes moving and sometimes inelegant protectiveness extends to his stepson in a way that aligns with conventional ideals of fatherhood. Jay is not altogether wrong when he identifies himself as the king and leader of the family in “Grill, Interrupted” (season 6, episode 19).

When Manny’s fall is not being absorbed by Jay or when Gloria is too distracted to maintain her fierce vigilance, he reveals an entirely different side, himself transforming into the parent who nurtures the adults surrounding him. Wise beyond his years, this well-spoken, suit-clad espresso connoisseur, so often in dire need of guidance and redirection when it comes to dating or general acceptance among his peers, steps in to guide the parental figures surrounding him when they need help. In “Come Fly With Me” (season 1, episode 3) Manny identifies himself as Claire’s brother and effectively becomes her ten-year-old confidant as she seeks parenting advice for her interactions with her daughters, Haley and Alex. When Gloria expects her second baby, Manny spends a moment feeling stressed about the addition of an infant he senses will become his responsibility (“Bringing Up Baby,” season 4, episode 1) and then rallies to the cause, sending Jay and Gloria to parenting classes (“Schooled,” season 4, episode 2), announcing that “we are having a baby,” and finally helping Gloria with her pregnancy anxieties by reassuring her that he is her partner in this process (“Snip,” season 4, episode 3).

Another instance of Manny-as-parent is Jay's birthday in "The One That Got Away" (season 2, episode 24). Here, all the adults and other children combine to ruin Jay's occasion, as they will again in future seasons, but Manny saves the day because only he is mature and selfless enough to listen and honor his stepfather's birthday wish. Whereas the rest of the family create chaos after chaos as they attempt to realize their idea of a good party and good gift, Manny takes seriously and fulfills Jay's desire to go fishing, even in the face of his limited resources and possibilities. After screening a very brief and loveless birthday video the family has made for Jay, Haley, for once agreeing with her sister, Alex, expresses her dismay at the final product, and Jay, unable to hide his disappointment, begins to mope:

Haley: That totally sucked.

Jay: You know what? Great party. Thank you all for coming. And I hope you forgive me. I'm gonna go upstairs, curl up with a Ludlum, and call it a day. *[Jay's cell phone rings.]* Hello.

Manny. Where are you? What are you doing out there? *[Jay goes outside to his pool, followed by his whole family. He finds Manny in his fishing boat, on the pool, stocked with fishing gear and a cooler.]* What the hell?

Manny: I dragged it back here this afternoon. I know it's not the lake. But maybe we could pop open a few drinks and hang out on the water.

Jay *[talking directly to the camera]*: Now the old Jay would have said . . . "I wanted to be on a lake with a fishing rod and sunshine. . . not bobbing around at night in a swimming pool". . . . I miss the old Jay.

Manny *[in the boat on the pool with Jay now also in the boat]*: This is the life, huh?

Jay *[touching glasses with Manny]*: It ain't half bad.

Jay's nostalgia for the old days and ways notwithstanding, he is moved; despite Manny's age and color, despite a past as an illegal immigrant and his status as stepson, the boy has much to offer the powerful white American elder of the clan. As James Parker notes, "The Jay/Manny nexus, between man-boy and boy-man, is one of the show's most reliable laugh lodes," but Manny's ability to step up just when Jay falls down also demonstrates his capacity to nurture him and the other adults surrounding him (Parker, 2011). Like Lily, he is cast as an adult in the guise of a child, but in contrast to Lily, he is not consistently the independent spirit whom his parents simply have to accept as an individual in his/her own right. Rather, Manny takes turns parenting with Gloria and Jay, as well as with other members of his extended family. As such, the second modern family of the show introduces another alternative form of parenting that does not feature the established pattern of parents gradually letting go as their children mature. Rather, this type of parenting involves various family members, young and old, who by turns act judiciously and suffer lapses of wisdom regardless of their stage in life. Adults and children step in and out of the role of parent, upending received notions of how the process of raising children works. Father and mother do not monopolize parenting; instead, raising children is a collaborative process in which father, mother, and child participate. This is especially significant for mothers as they are frequently held responsible for the kin-keeping Manny provides and are often expected to do this by themselves. If Manny counsels Claire, she is no longer alone in seeking a solution for her problems with her daughters; if Manny saves Jay's birthday and makes him feel loved, the blame for a failed day no longer rests on Gloria's shoulders. Manny's pretense at being an adult is, in fact, a combination of childish affect and mature skill, and while Jay is periodically irritated by

Manny's old soul, finicky manners, and polished speech, he, who is too old to have a mother or father to lean on, benefits by the support this boy affords.

Claire, Phil and the Virtues of Childish Parenting

The third couple of the show, Claire and Phil Dunphy, are the biological parents of their three children Haley, Alex, and Luke, making the Dunphys the only nuclear family that holds up to the strictest definition of the term. The show's creators play with gender role reversals: much has been made of Phil's effeminacy, and Claire is almost uniformly characterized as the woman wearing the pants. Tellingly, in "Earthquake" (season 2, episode 3) Claire cannot rely on Phil and, in the end, does not need him to free herself from her entrapment in their upstairs bathroom. The messages are mixed, however: Claire is also very much the mom who keeps the house and chauffeurs the kids, while Phil adopts the stereotypical role of the bungling dad who should really just leave the house and go to work.

Claire's is a complicated character: seen in the context of her relationship with her husband, she assumes the role of the successful career woman who, in "First Days" (season 5, episode 2), returns to work in Jay's closet company and immediately takes on a managerial position; seen as Jay's child, by contrast, she is, much less impressively, the boss's daughter. Dismissively, her daughter, Haley, says to her: "You're working for grandpa; it's not even a real job." Claire's standing shifts depending on her environment, a fact that is reinforced by her nervous affect and hectic movements. The interplay between feminist empowerment and filial disempowerment is well established in "The Big Game" (season 5, episode 9):

Claire [*in the closet warehouse, talking to an employee named Tim*]: Beautiful model. Gorgeous. You guys do such good work down here.

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Claire: Really. You mind if I take her for a spin . . . before she goes up to the showroom?

Tim: You're the boss.

Claire: . . . 's daughter. Yeah, that's what you want to say. [*Walking into a closet.*] Oh, okay. So--so no mirror when they're shipping, which makes sense. [*The latch clicks shut while Claire is in the closet.*] Also have, uh, no handles. Hey, hey Tim. [*Banging on the closet door.*] Hey, Tim? [*Claire's cell phone rings.*] Tim! Oh, God. Yeah, hi, Dad.

Jay: Hey co-worker. Just seeing when you want to leave for the game. We're late already.

Claire: Soon, soon. [*Tries to open the closet by clapping her hands*]. I'm--I'm just--finishing up a little paperwork in my office.

Jay: Okay. Let me know if you need any help.

Claire [*trying to climb out of the closet*]: No, I don't need your help as I believe I mentioned. . . I would appreciate it if you were not constantly looking over my shoulder.

Jay [*witnessing Claire's problems on a monitor hooked up to a security camera*]: Come on, give me some credit. That's the last thing I would do.

Claire: Dad, you seem to forget that I raised three children . . . and I had a career before this. I have done plenty of stuff that does not. . . Oh! [*Claire's climbing maneuvers knock down large boxes throughout the whole warehouse, creating a vast and loud domino effect*].

Phil: Do you hear that? Sounds like it's coming from the warehouse.

Claire: Yeah, what even is that?

Phil [catching a mug that is about to slide off his desk as a result of the rumble below]: Oh, I'm sure it's nothing. Uh, one piece of advice, take it or leave it.

Claire [on top of the closet, exhausted]: What?

Phil: The latch is under the panel on the right.

[*Claire looks up into the security camera, realizing her father has been watching her.*]

If need be, Claire can literally get herself out of her prison with her husband—she escapes from the locked bathroom on her own—but she has considerably more trouble freeing herself from her father—climbing over the top of the walk-in closet in the warehouse leaves her exhausted and humiliated. In addition, we do not see her completing the climb; instead, the camera cuts as she hangs, in limbo, on the top edge of the closet door. Jay is hardly serious about calling her his “coworker”; in “A Hard Jay’s Night” (season 5, episode 19) it is clear that he wants to preserve boundaries because he can never acknowledge Claire’s accomplishments or thank her for a job well done.

In the above scene, it is telling that Claire’s greatest strategy to stand her ground as an independent career woman is to invoke not only a job she held in the past but her role as a mother of three children. She tries to be as a superwoman who does everything while staying beautiful and trim. While this gives the series’ writers a chance to showcase the many sides this kind of character demands, Claire’s ambitions do not revolutionize women’s roles: like most women in the First World who, as Anna Quindlen puts it in her essay against postfeminism, “have won the right to do as much as men do” but not “the right to do as little as men do,” Claire strives for “effortless perfection” (Quindlen, 2003). She has more responsibilities than ever, a point that is driven home by the ridiculous amount of tech-heavy remote multi-tasking she does

to micro-manage events in her family while on a business trip in “Connection Lost” (season 6, episode 16).

The show’s variations on traditional gender scripts, then--a wife going back to work or sometimes fixing a lock, a husband who cannot repair things around the house but does sneak a day at the spa (“Two Monkeys and a Panda,” season 2, episode 17)--hardly shake American core values of the twenty-first century, especially when normalized by middle-class, straight, biological, white, thin, youthful, conventionally beautiful American individuals. *Modern Family* has a lot of leeway before it loses its 2010 standing as “the third-most popular show among Republicans” (Feiler, 2011). The development of Claire’s character as a superwoman, in particular, does little more than thinly mask deeply conservative patriarchal ideals of womanhood: Claire, like many “liberated” women today, spreads herself thin trying to be a caring wife, a competent mother, a beautiful woman, and a successful professional. Hectically flitting from private pillar to public post, she serves the family, patriarchy, and capitalism, everything and everyone but herself. Like many women, she spends her days trying to reconcile contradictions that, as many feminists have argued, have the ultimate purpose of keeping her in line. Phil, too, hardly stretches traditional ideals of manhood to the breaking point. Despite his effeminate episodes, he is the principal breadwinner; despite his goofy gestures, he looks masculine and dresses in conventionally male ways. He is clearly attracted to the opposite sex and flirts with women according to well established gender scripts. It may seem trivial to observe that he is taller and, by all appearances, a little older than Claire, that he is darker in hair and complexion and louder in expression, but it is not beside the point to note that he fits in with traditional ideas of manhood by accepting and, what’s more, feeling at ease with a wife who runs

herself ragged trying to be a superwoman. All this, then, is simple replication of very familiar patterns.

It gets more interesting when it comes to Claire and Phil's parenting and, more specifically, their parental shortcomings. Phil is far from perfect, and while Claire may have ambitions to be a superwoman, she is no supermom. Unlike Mitch and Cam, the Dunphy parents have an effect on their three children: they lead by negative example, showing Haley, Alex, and Luke what does not work. Unlike Gloria and Phil, who collaborate with Manny in the project of parenting, Phil and Claire compete with their children. They try to outperform them, outwit them, vying not only with each other but with their own children for winner status in many things they do. Themselves resembling children who decidedly do not make a habit of putting their children's interests above their own, they are everything from playful and fun-loving to manipulative and deceptive. Indeed, they are immature teens in the guise of adults who rival the real teens of their household, and it is perhaps not surprising that they reach (a carefully groomed, youthful) middle age before they pay back the loan Claire's wealthy father, Jay, extended when they first bought their house ("Grill, Interrupted," season 6, episode 19). Because they are so busy growing up themselves, they cannot encourage Alex's academic excellence, they cannot protect Luke from the danger of his many household science experiments, and they cannot control whether or when Haley's downward spiral into ditzy cluelessness will change course. Again and again, Phil and Claire enter a cycle that begins with an attempt at parenting their children but then morphs into infantile behaviors that leave their kids unremediated, unguided, and left to their own devices. If their children take a turn for the better, it is not because of Claire or Phil but in spite of them.

Dysfunctional families are standard fare in American culture and certainly in family sitcoms, but this kind of parenting puts a new spin on dysfunction on both sides of the screen. In “Treehouse” (season 3, episode 7), Claire’s intention is to teach Haley a lesson because she has accused her mother of making life too easy and thereby making it too difficult to write a school essay on “The Biggest Obstacle You Had to Overcome.” What could have been a parenting moment--instructing Haley about the benefits of measured tone and the drawbacks of impulsive accusation--turns into an act of revenge when Claire tricks Haley into accompanying her into the wilderness and there abandons her daughter in order to fabricate an obstacle she now has to overcome. Haley is forced to find her way home without a phone, car, or money and is probably right to call her mother “psychotic,” concluding that the biggest obstacle she has had to overcome has been “growing up normal despite my crazy mom!” Claire comes by her childish behavior honestly: in spite of his periodic ability to mentor Manny and his other grandchildren, Jay lapses into modes of competitiveness, thriving especially on outdoing his own daughter, as seen in “Egg Drop” (season 3, episode 12) and “A Hard Jay’s Night” (season 5, episode 19). He also devises complex stratagems to avoid confession, as when, in “Truth Be Told” (season 1, episode 17), he stages an elaborate alibi involving muddy stuffed-animal footprints on wall and carpet in order to claim that a raccoon, not he, has killed Manny’s turtle.

Phil, too, struggles with mature behavior. In “The Bicycle Thief” (season 1, episode 2) he discusses the key to good parenting in terms of giving children “the freedom to be what they want to be,” but clearly he himself needs all the parenting he can get. Going against Claire’s will and purchasing a new bike for Luke, he exposes himself as unworthy of the parenting team of which he fancies himself a part. When he believes that Luke has carelessly forgotten to lock up the new bike, he wants to teach his son a parental lesson: he pretends to steal it. The problem is

he steals another boy's (identical) bike. Luke has, in fact, safely stowed away his bike in the family garage, a possibility Phil never considers. Phil later loses track of the bike he has taken and thinks it is really stolen. He tries to cover up his many blunders by buying another bike, the third in the tangle. He ensnares himself in a maze that involves too many bicycles, multiple lies, wasteful spending, and sneaking around, all to get out of trouble, avoid telling the truth, and stay in his family's good graces. From start to finish, he acts far more childish than Luke, and like a child, he is caught before long: realizing that he really has stolen a bicycle instead of staging the theft of his son's, he sets out to return what is not his. The rightful owner, as it happens a little black boy, sees him with the bike he has missed and begins to confront him about it. Unable to take responsibility for his actions and utterly unequipped to deal with the racial otherness of the boy, Phil drops the bike, screams, and starts running for dear life. His childish reaction, heightened by his fear of standing up to a boy, calls attention to the fact that he never even tried to have a parenting moment in this incident: as a pretend-bicycle thief, he had not really set out to teach Luke a lesson. Instead, he wanted to secure the bike he believed was on the verge of disappearing and thereby avoid admitting to Claire that she was right to have reservations about the purchase of an expensive bike that Luke might lose soon after. But Claire, too, falls short because she was, in fact, wrong to have reservations. Luke has scratched his bike, nothing out of the ordinary for a child who is in the process of perfecting his cycling skills, but he proves his maturity by responsibly putting up his bike. He has exceeded both parents' expectations; meanwhile, Phil and Claire have more than underwhelmed him, the innocent black child, and each other.

LaVecchia discusses two further scenes in which Phil and Claire regress into similarly infantile behaviors. Fed up with her inattention, Claire, in "Hawaii" (season 1, episode 23), takes

Haley's cell phone from her, and what momentarily looks like a parental team moment for Phil and Claire turns into a childish fight between adults as Phil takes possession of the phone and then throws it into a pool. Claire undermines Phil's parenting, and indeed all parenting, by redirecting her attention away from Haley's offense and toward Phil response: no longer worried about Haley's behavior, she is now upset that a perfectly good cell phone has been ruined. The second scene that LaVecchia isolates is Phil's BB gun punishment in the show's pilot episode. Luke is to be punished for shooting Alex with a BB gun. Claire and Phil try to find a time in their busy day when they can carry out such justice. However, they get so caught up in searching for a free slot on their kitchen calendar that they lose sight of the absurdity of their punishment, which is, as Claire jots down, to shoot Luke at 4:15, after his birthday party and soccer commitments have been met. They also lose sight of Alex's admittedly minor injury. As LaVecchia comments, "Classic sitcom situations, like punishing children, are approached with a twist We expect, in a family sitcom, for a father to punish his son for acting up and hurting his siblings; what we don't expect is for his father to shoot him with the same BB gun in the backyard." She concludes that "the show's play on presentations of traditional parenting is arguably the most progressive, 'modern' aspect of the show. . . ." (LaVecchia, 2011).

What LaVecchia calls progressive could easily be seen as regressive: Phil not only takes possession of the gun, a toy for children; he also handles it as a child would because he ends up losing control and accidentally shooting everyone in the vicinity. Most important, he delights in firing the gun, not because he is a cruel parent but because he is playful boy. In the final scene of the pilot episode, his immaturity is again on display as he plays trampoline basketball with Luke. He dunks both Luke and the ball, using physical heft to win rather than pedagogical skill to teach. Luke is being bullied rather than parented. This scene is echoed later in season 6, when

Luke is much older and begins to outperform his father in a number of ways. Blind to every defeat he sustains and quick to project his own weakness and failure onto his son, Phil does everything in his power to ward off the reality of his aging while becoming more and more the desperate child as he goes (“Spring Break,” season 6, episode 18). Even when he comes to a realization about what he is doing, apologizing for insulting, injuring, and belittling Luke, he seems like a crushed child. Tellingly, he suggests continuing his father-son talk, a talk that reveals Luke’s increasing sexual maturation, in a playhouse at the pediatrician’s waiting room. In one of show’s earliest interview asides, Claire holds forth about parenting as follows: “Raising kids is like building a car. You only have so much time to make sure the steering works and the brakes stop and the engine is dependable before you send it out on the road, and if you get one little rivet wrong, it will drive off a cliff and explode.” In *Modern Family*, the parents are the car that has derailed and exploded (“Pilot,” season 1, episode 1).

The children, on the other hand, do surprisingly well under the circumstances. Haley, the family’s greatest worry, gets herself on track in spite of her parents’ tantrums, caprices, and manipulations. In “Three Dinners” (season 5, episode 13), she turns tables on her Claire and Phil, beginning to shed her image as a loser who lives in her parents’ basement, cannot pull herself out of her bed or away from her phone, fitfully attends community-college classes, and generally leeches off of her mother and father. A critical comment that Claire angrily yells out after Haley finally rises one early afternoon sums up her parents’ frustration with her: “Is this what you’re gonna do with your life? Sleep late and take a selfie?” The parents have her slotted in what Sean Covy, in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, calls the “Slacker Time Quadrant” (Covy, 1998: pg. 110). They think of her as a “professional loafer” who “loves anything in excess, like too

much TV, too much sleep, too many video games, or too much time on the Web. . . . School, of course, is the last thing on [her] mind.”

Taking Haley out to a nice restaurant, ostensibly to have a fun night but in reality to confront her about her future, the Dunphy elders launch an interrogation that quickly turns into a heated argument. But Haley valiantly defends herself, producing evidence that she has started a fashion blog which is attracting over a thousand followers. She has a plan that involves taking a business class and becoming a fashion stylist. Haley is right to be suspicious when her parents receive this news about her plan by expressing a shallow “We are so proud of you.” She retorts:

Haley: Don’t even, guys. You always assume the worst of me.

Phil: Honey--

Haley: No, you guys sit here acting like we’re drinking buddies, judging me, when I have a better handle on my future than either one of you did at my age. You? You wanted to be a magician. And you were changing your major every three minutes, according to grandpa-- who, by the way, has been drinking with me for years because he loves me, and he thinks I say funny things when I’m buzzed.

Like contrite, remorseful children, Phil and Claire beg that Haley not be “mad” at them anymore. But Haley is unrelenting:

Haley: You know what I’m pretty sure is ironic?

Claire: Mnh-mnh.

Haley: You guys spend all this time worrying about what I'm going to do, and maybe you should start thinking about what you're going to do.

Claire: What are you talking about?

Haley: Well, what are you gonna do when we're gone? What's your plan?

Claire: Uh, to be fine.

Phil: Yeah.

Claire: 'Cause we're fine.

Phil: Totally. You guys you're gone. We get an RV. Bam! Me, mama and our dog, Merlin, hit the open road.

Claire: No. I am not spending my golden years driving around an RV park, looking for a place to plug my house in. No. I am gonna go see the world.

Phil: Where do you wanna go?

Claire: I don't know, Phil. India. Africa.

Phil: Diarrhea. Diarrhea.

Haley: Wow. It sounds like you guys really need to start thinking about your future.

Phil: Are you just gonna put Merlin in a kennel when we're gone?

Claire: Okay, Phil, Merlin doesn't exist. And why do you want to get a dog to take care of so soon after the kids leave?

Phil: Well, I'm gonna need someone to love me, Claire.

Haley: And in the meantime, mom, grandpa wants you to take over the business, but do you want that?

Claire: I-I guess I hadn't thought this far into the future.

Haley: And, dad, are you just gonna keep selling houses? I mean, I don't want to blow your mind

here, but you could still be a magician.

Phil: I could.

Claire: Mnh-mnh. He couldn't.

Phil: Really?

Claire: Mnh-mnh.

After exposing the truth that unlike their child, the parents have no vision for the future, they proceed to play with the salt shaker and show various other signs of tipsy behavior. In addition, they have forgotten their wallet, effectively leaving it to Haley to assume responsibility for the bill and for driving them home. In control of the situation, she says in a half-sweet, half-mocking tone:

Haley: It's fine, guys. I got this.

Phil: Honey, thank you.

Claire: Oh, thank you, sweets.

Haley: I should probably drive, too, huh?

Phil: Probably.

Claire: I gue-- Yeah.

Phil: Yeah.

Haley: Why don't you guys have the valet pull the car up while I pay the check?

Phil: That we can do.

Haley [*redirecting her parents, who are headed the wrong way*]: Uh, you guys, it's that way.

The Dunphy parents assume a shockingly flexible parenting style that verges on irresponsibility—they almost get themselves arrested when, on another drunken night in “Knock ‘em Down” (season 6, episode 20), they back a truck into a neighbor’s front-yard statue because they find it distasteful. The entire neighborhood shuns them on Halloween because Claire cannot control her urge to use every special effect money can buy to trigger terror verging on heart attack (“Open House of Horrors,” season 4, episode 5). Their children’s welfare and development compete with the parents’ own need to grow and mature, an approach that flies in the face of familiar parenting philosophies that insist we must cherish, validate, and put our children first. Phil and Claire stun their children and the viewers with their unpredictable actions and inconsistent role-modeling. The qualities that make a traditionally good parent—wisdom, compassion, control, even-temperedness, fairness, and selflessness—crop up at decidedly irregular intervals. Yet the kids thrive, and so does the family as a whole. Perhaps Claire’s and Phil’s regressive behaviors are the play on traditional parenting that LaVecchia labels progressive.

Haley continues to flourish as she asserts herself in private and public contexts alike. She showcases her talent and secures the attention of snooty fashion designer Gavin Sinclair in “Queer Eyes, Full Hearts” (season 6, episode 7). Imperceptibly to Phil and Claire, it seems, Haley slips into the best of Covey’s time quadrants, “the Prioritizer.” “Although she’s by no means perfect,” the prioritizer has “basically got it together” (Covey, 1998: pg. 111). Haley not only develops practical skills in spite of her parents; she also matures emotionally, the truly bad role-modeling her parents deliver notwithstanding: for example, in “Spring Break” (season 6, episode 18) she is far more effective than Claire and Phil in helping Alex deal with her rejection from Harvard University. *Modern Family*, then, profoundly shakes conventional age hierarchies

and received truths such as “mom knows best”; far from wise, the Dunphy elders stand to learn from their children, preferably most of the time.

Equally important, the Dunphys challenge gender hierarchies. For all their parental fumbling, they, as well as the show as a whole, meticulously refrain from pointing a finger at the mother only. The writers of *Modern Family* democratically distribute the blunders to which Phil and Claire subject their children. And the show permits Claire to fall short of the supermom ideal. Despite her ambition to do it all and despite buying into conservative notions of modern femininity, her character is, in fact, specifically tailored to be something far less than perfect. She has much too much maturing to do to focus on guiding her children, but ultimately everyone, including her children and herself, accept this: she, like Phil, is without question a loving, dedicated parent, and she, like Phil, contributes to the stability of her family in spite of the chaos she spreads with him. With her character *Modern Family* has engendered a child-woman who may not correspond to sky-high standards of contemporary femininity, but who expands and contracts received models of mothering, creating a new script that affords room to grow up some more and grants the right to be less than perfect.

Modern Family successfully makes traditionally marginalized characters--gay men, divorcés, Hispanics, the poor—palatable to center-right America. Its three major threats to the traditional nuclear family—homosexuality, divorce, and gender role reversal—are easily absorbed by the show’s upper-middle class suburban gloss as well by each family member’s commitment to the concept of family and togetherness. But Parker’s conclusion that “As to the politics of the show, I’ve concluded that there are none,” fails to acknowledge the series’ readiness to let its mothers, fathers, and children engage in negotiations with the dominant parenting ideals in ways that chip away at rock-solid principles by which we live our domestic

lives (Parker, 2011). Questions about who wields and should wield power are asked and hierarchies are second-guessed, making the show inherently and importantly political. At times, children develop outside parental influence. Sometimes as mature, skilled, and empowered as adults, they can be team-collaborators in the enterprise of parenting. And sometimes they blossom in spite of their parents; escaping their parents' childish competitions, revenge plots, and tricks, they somehow come out ahead. *Modern Family* does not, then, use parental shortcomings as means to create simple comic dysfunction. As normative notions of parenthood are questioned and mocked, and as the hyper-parenting pact of the First World in the twenty-first century is stood on its head, inconsistencies and logical gaps emerge that become the spaces in which viewers find comfort and wiggle room to also be different parents. Portraying profoundly different approaches to parenting that, together, make parenting seem like a provisional, situational, self-contradictory, inconsistent, unreliable endeavor rather than an immutable institution built on golden rules, clear hierarchies, and age-old wisdoms, the series makes it impossible either to identify with wholly or to repudiate fully any given parent, parenting moment, or parenting strategy. Everything is overdrawn and exaggerated; the show is, after all, a comedy. But its play on parenting argues that parent-viewers and, particularly, mother-viewers can maybe, just maybe, allow their children to do some of their developing on their own, accept assistance from their kids here and there, even periodically lapse into unwise, childish behavior, and still come away intact, confident that both they and their families will be alright.

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