



## A Look at Mothers and Fathers in the Media

With late spring comes the timing of Mother's Day and Father's Day advertising. We can always expect to see the same images of mothers and fathers in our media this time of year. We pass billboards telling us to buy jewelry or send flowers to mom. Dad needs more ties, some stuff from a hardware store, and maybe a \$5 Hallmark card. The commercials are warm and fuzzy and usually take place during the early morning hours with dad waking up and eating breakfast, even if that [breakfast is at midnight](#). While dad is getting treated to a late-night snack or breakfast in bed, mom is still taking care of everything around the house. As caretaker, she may be washing laundry (using Tide of course), changing diapers (Pampers), and driving her child to practice so she or he can eventually become [an Olympic superstar](#). She may be [giving a bath](#) to her cute baby model while being reassured that she is "doing okay" by Johnson & Johnson, echoing the message we see over and over again in both our media and political systems that mamas don't know how to parent their children. Often we are too distracted by these warm moments between the parents and those adorable children to pause and think critically about the messages that are implied. The diversion technique can be extremely effective when we are tearing up and thinking about the children or parents in our own lives. Honoring mamas and papas is a great thing, but acting like parents matter in order to sell more greeting cards and dish soap is not what [Anna Jarvis](#), the founder of Mother's Day, had in mind.



THE SHARPIE RETRACTABLE. ONE HAND IS ALL IT TAKES.



NOW AVAILABLE IN 12 COLORS.

We must also look at the representations of parents during the other ten months of the year. We still see that mothers are only caretakers and little else. Fathers, on the other hand, are not good caretakers according to much of the media we see. This print ad for Sharpie is one media example that Media Literacy Project has been using for a few years in [our trainings](#) on gender representations. The ad features a white man in his 20s or 30s with four babies. The Sharpie is being used to label names, Ben, Ted, Jeff, on the babies' diapers. Given the model and setting, the ad is likely targeting white, middle-class men and women with children. This print ad uses humor (because who can't tell their own children apart?), association (Sharpie equals humor and is easy to use), explicit claims (available in 12 colors), and warm and fuzzy (babies). The humor technique also has a negative side. It sends the message that fathers don't know how to take care of children, and even more so, don't even know their own children's names.

We are exposed to different standards for women and men who parent. Women are shown doing it all but it usually isn't enough and they have to be reassured. Conversely, men don't have to do much for people to be amazed at how good of a father they are. These ideas play out both within the media world and in the real world. Both types of messages are insulting to mothers and fathers. In addition to the media stories that tell us that parents don't know how to be parents and have limited roles as parents, we also only see one simplified picture of family life. Most often in Mother's Day and Father's Day commercials, or any commercials with parents, we see a husband and wife living happily together with their children. Those that don't fit into this picture can be left feeling that they don't fit in this world. The reality is that three out of four families don't fit the frame of having heterosexual parents living under one roof with a dad that works and a mom that stays home. This frame not only affects how people might feel, it is too often used to create inadequate healthcare policies, economic policies, and other policies that impact our real-life families. Luckily, there are ongoing local and national initiatives that proactively address the needs of all families.