

# TV Sunday

# D'oh! I've been a bad TV dad

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**P**ICTURE a classic TV dad. For most people, the image that springs to mind is Robert Young from "Father Knows Best," Fred MacMurray from "My Three Sons" or some other wise comforting figure.

"The Cosby Show," "The Brady Bunch," "Ozzie and Harriet" — TV history is filled with uberdads who knew how to keep kids in line with love and discipline.

Sure, they could also be a little bumbling. But ever since Archie Bunker, more and more TV dads seem downright dangerous. Watch "Leave It to Beaver" and you might learn a few heartfelt lessons. Watch "Married With Children" and you want to call the police to arrest Al

Bundy for child neglect. Do today's TV dads fall that short? Take Hal, the slightly cowed husband on "Malcolm in the Middle."  
"Hal is a wonderful dad," insists actor Bryan Cranston, who plays the character. "He's very sensitive, he's very kind — especially when you compare him to [wife] Lois. He's the softer side. He knows how to roller skate."

Hal has an ability that's really for his own survival, Cranston says. "He's able to have his mind just check out, like Walter Mitty. Hal goes off and builds a little spacecraft in his mind so he can survive the chaos of four children."

"Then he comes back to reality and unfortunately he's two steps behind and has to quickly catch up."

Hal is a little clueless, but no more than his competitors. On ABC's new family sitcom, "My Wife and Kids," the ad campaign jokes that Damon Wayans actually thinks he's in charge. On "The King of Queens," Jerry Stahl (Jerry Stiller) rants and raves at his son just like Stiller did as Frank Costanza on "Seinfeld."

On "Titus," Stacey Keach is a little more clued in — when he's sober. And on "Everybody Loves Raymond," the parents seem to go weeks and weeks without remembering they have children at all. (What do those kids do upstairs all that time?)

"That's been the flavor for the '90s," says Cranston, "a dad that's been put upon. Because you can't do the reverse now, it wouldn't be acceptable. You can't say, 'Oh, what a dingbat, like Archie did on 'All in the Family.'"

"It just wouldn't work anymore." Tim Brooks, the co-author of "The Complete Directory to Primetime Network and Cable TV Shows," and an executive at Lifetime, agrees.

"Look at 'My Wife and Kids,'" says Brooks. "It's a classic formula. The dad's not a doofus; he's just kind of nutty and doesn't quite get it. Aside from Homer ('The Simpsons'), the dads aren't portrayed as quite the overt bumbler as they used to be. They're generally well meaning, but mom wears the pants in the family."

But as Brooks points out, there have always been sitcoms making fun of dads. The real change came when advertisers realized their target audience was women and kids — and that it was the woman who decided which detergent to buy. "In the '60s and '70s, when they figured out who was watching television and advertisers focused on women, it became a little less cool to knock mom," says Brooks. "They were trying to appeal to mom. So dad became more the figure of fun. That's why 'Malcolm in the Middle' is a little unusual, because mom is as much of a loony as dad is."

Sitcom dads are the butt of jokes. But

Why don't they make fathers like they used to?



Picket-fence perfect: Robert Young and the family in "Father Knows Best" (above left) and Bill Cosby have been replaced by moms as the voices of reason.

TV dads on dramas don't fare any better. On "Once & Again," the divorced dads spend most episodes burdening the kids with their troubles. On "Providence" and "Gilmore Girls," the dad is untrustworthy. On "Dawson's Creek," the dads are beside the point.

And then there's Tony Soprano, who spent the season finale of "The Sopranos" hitting his son and getting furious with his daughter (who got drunk and misbehaved after her old boyfriend was offed by one of his captains).

About the only traditional TV dad in all of television is the Rev. Eric Camden on "The WB's '7th Heaven'."

"I'm sort of the last one of those," admits actor Stephen Collins, who plays



Damon Wayans is the wacky dad in a D cup in "My Wife and Kids."

Homer Simpson is a danger to kids everywhere, while "Raymond" seems to forget he even has children.

"People long for a good family on television," he says. "Most writers can't write a good family without making it saccharine and sickly and boring."

Cranston — of "Malcolm in the Middle" — says Hal isn't so ineffectual. But ask him to mention a favorite episode, and it involves Hal taking the kids to a casino and getting boy genius Malcolm to help him cheat.

Another favorite? "Hal takes the kids to a race car track instead of school," remembers Cranston. "He's thrilled to be with his boys and wants to show them a good time, teach them something about life. His son Dewey ends up on the track, and the boys end up in trouble, and I end up kicking the security guard. And we try to fool mom, and she catches us."

And it's that kind of parenting that ensures the kids will remember Hal on Father's Day. "Basically, Hal would love as a Father's Day present just for the kids to leave," says Cranston. "Get out of the house and let your mother and I run naked through the house. That would be my best Father's Day present."

Camden. And he's quick to agree that there's a link between that traditional image of a dad and the fact that "7th Heaven" is The WB's top-rated show. "I think there is a link," he says. "Television writers fell in love with the dysfunctional family and ran wild with it. But I think the audience has always had a place in its heart for the iconic, fantasy family like 'Ozzie and Harriet' and 'Father Knows Best.'"