

# Male Stereotypes: The Sexy Dad and Caring Father

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This entry will explore how fatherhood can be articulated as both an opportunity for men to demonstrate their caring, nurturing side, whilst also being a site for sexual desirability, popularly referred to as the male equivalent of “mother I would like to fuck” (MILF): “Dad I would like to fuck”, or DILF (see Smith, 2018). The “new man” masculinity that emerged in the 1990s will be drawn on in respect of how this came to be linked with the popularizing of female-directed pornography around the same time, finally merging in the 21st century as the “sexy dad.” By drawing on various media texts relating to fatherhood, this entry will show how there is a self-presentation of fatherhood that is largely in line with the caring, emotional “new man,” but at times wittily espousing a playful form of macho masculinity linked with gym culture. This is contrasted with the media interpretation of such fatherhood that seeks to sexualize the male body in the popular press. The discussion finds that the act of carrying or holding a child becomes a site for these two discourses to meet, both in the visual images used to illustrate stories and in the associated text.

The emergence of second wave feminism in the 1970s saw issues of gender equality being raised in a global context, but particularly in Western contexts. The rise of female empowerment as a direct result of this, in law, education, employment opportunities, and society in general, and was initially seen as a threat to traditional masculine power. As many studies have pointed out (e.g., Susan Jeffords, 1994), “classic macho” was revived as a dominant form of masculinity, as seen in popular culture characters such as Rambo. However, this “hard man” dominance was short-lived and essentially masculinity morphed in an attempt to resolve the problems that this initial crisis in male identity posed. This form of masculinity “shared” the domestic chores, and even dipped into the female stereotypical area of “rapport,” with relationship chats that had previously only been associated with female conversation and women’s magazines. Various sociologists explored how fatherhood could be a means for men to reconnect with their emotions whilst also challenging the public and private forms of power that patriarchy traditionally governed (e.g., Elliott, 2016; Seidler, 1997). Pederson and O’Mara’s (1990) study of American fatherhood found that men were looking back at their own upbringing and perceiving their fathers as being merely economic providers rather than a source of emotional support and care. These men contrasted their own “traditional” fathers, whom they represented as “absent, preoccupied with work” with an idealized “new father” who was the hands-on, domesticated dad (1990, p. 83).

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Many studies have shown that there was an associated rise in men's involvement in childcare at this time. In particular, one effect of the feminist movement had been to get more women into the workplace, and for women to continue to be in paid work after having children. Not only had it become acceptable for men to engage in a more active form of domesticity through hands-on fatherhood, but wider economic changes made this something of a necessity. As Lupton and Barclay have commented, fatherhood "is commonly portrayed as a major opportunity for modern men to express their nurturing feelings in ways that their own fathers supposedly did not, and to take an equal role in parenting with their female partners" (1998, p. 1). In this way, men were able to distance themselves from the traditional models of masculinity that second wave feminism had problematized, and thus make themselves more acceptable to those who agreed with this ideology of gender equality. A generation after the emergence of feminism as a powerful force, it has passed into common sense that fatherhood is a positive experience but is still regarded as being something of a novelty when it comes to public figures. Thus when Andy Murray had major surgery for a long-standing hip problem in January 2018, he released a statement saying that he put himself through such a risky operation because he wanted his eldest daughter to see him play in tournaments. At 30, Murray had fewer years left to play tennis at this top level, but his motivation to continue turned out to be not winning more major tournaments but wanting to continue playing to a point where his daughter would be old enough to acknowledge this. So not only is fatherhood perceived as making someone a "better" person, but is acting as a motivational force for further improvement.

What studies of fatherhood and the new man have found is that popular culture plays an important part in making such performances of masculinity acceptable, and even desirable. The image of the "sensitive new age man" appeared in countless tv shows, films, and novels, with the concurrent rise in media reporting of well-known personalities who were keen to demonstrate their feminist-friendly credentials. In particular, in 1996 in the United Kingdom, then leader of the opposition, Tony Blair, appeared in the British *Parents* magazine under the headline "Being a dad is harder than being a politician." As Jane Sunderland has argued, "it is the 'celebrity' of a celebrity father that is responsible for the media representation of his fatherhood" (2004, p. 125). She goes on to claim that celebrity fatherhood is newsworthy on both a national and international level "since it provides an insight into the private and personal life of a public figure" (2004, p. 125) whilst non-celebrity fatherhood is less interesting because of the lack of immediate public recognition of the man involved, and so is not usually newsworthy. In the case of Tony Blair, elected in 1997 "as a potentially dynamic and modern leader, the family man who already had three children, and no shortage of convictions and principles, who might be expected to promote (if not practise) 'shared parenting' more than most prime ministers" (Sunderland, 2004, p. 125). When Blair became the first British prime minister for 151 years (at least, that we know of) to become a father when in office after the birth of his fourth child, Leo, in 2000, the juxtaposition of ultimate political power and childcare duties ensured his new fatherhood credentials were visible globally. In her study of media coverage of this, Sunderland noted that "nappy changing" was the action most readily associated with this sort of hands-on fatherhood.

Like Blair, other politicians have used their new fatherhood status to engage societies where second wave feminism had led to assumption of gender equality at the level of common sense. Barak Obama in the 2007–2008 presidential campaign in the United States played on his hands-on role as father to his two daughters (see Smith, 2016), and back in the United Kingdom, David Cameron, as the younger leader of the Conservative Party during the 2010 general election, played on his image of hands-on father throughout that leadership campaign, despite the more traditional stance of his party.

So, if we can now acknowledge that the collocation of new man and fatherhood has become an acceptable, or desirable, attribute of masculinity in the public sphere, then we can now begin to explore how this has been expanded to include a curious manifestation of popular masculinity that combines macho masculinity with new fatherhood, and has led to the evolution of the “sexy dad.”

The impetus behind the traditional shift of the “male gaze” on women to a gaze directed at men is in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In 1979, The Chippendales, an all-male dance troupe was formed in Los Angeles. Their striptease act proved popular with female audiences and soon The Chippendales were being promoted as the “ultimate girls’ night out.” This coincided with the rise of gym culture in the 1980s which saw the rise of the male body being displayed for its bulk and associated physical power. The hairless, tanned torsos of the Chippendales reflected the body images previously favored primarily by body builders. As Niall Richardson (2010) has suggested, the more extreme versions of competitive bodybuilding from the 1980s onward can be seen to be a reaction to the mainstreaming of the previous form of macho male body image as it became popularized by The Chippendales. Thus the Chippendale-esque body itself is a stylized version of the macho body builder as a result of its mainstreaming.

The emergent normality of the sexualized male body took hold in popular culture. An early indication of this market had appeared in the form of what became an iconic image of the 1980s: the Athena poster “Man and Baby,” or “L’Enfant.” Athena is a retailer that dominated UK highstreets in the 1980s, selling fine art and popular culture posters, and was very popular with teenagers. This particular black and white image showed model Adam Perry holding an infant, Perry’s upper torso bare to reveal a gym-toned body. It became the best-selling image of the era, embodying the notion of the “handsome hunk” whilst also pointing to the caring, nurturing side of the “new man.” Along with other black and white images of semi-naked, gym-toned male bodies (often depicted engaging in hard manual labor), they proved to be bestsellers for the Athena chain throughout the 1990s (Milmo, 2007).

Colloquially, the sexy dad has come to be referred to as DILF, which is the male equivalent of MILF. DILF seems to have emerged in print media around 2011. A blog post on mommyish.com is headed “DILF beach; where did all these hot dads come from?” (May 27, 2011). Since then, the term has spread into common usage with a similarly taboo status as MILF.

The honed and toned body of the sexy dad is one thing that media reporting repeatedly picks up on. Social media has become crowded with postings of men in gym wear holding their infant child in the manner of a dumbbell, showing off the flexed biceps whilst simultaneously displaying a version of hands-on fatherhood. This has been

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popularized by actors such as Chris Hemsworth, who frequently posts such photos of himself holding one or more of his three young children on Instagram in wittily-posed gym shots. Instagram sites such as “DILFS of Disneyland” and “DILFS of Starbucks” collate images of similar-looking men, overwhelmingly of the “hipster” sort with beards, baseball caps, Ray-Ban Wayfarers, taut t-shirts, and at least one visible tattoo. These collated Instagram sites contain such pictures that are a mixture of clearly posed and furtively snatched images. A common feature is that any female companion is carefully edited out of the image, with the focus then being explicitly on fatherhood rather than parenthood.

Beyond social media, with its often witty presentation of the sexy dad, mainstream media is also a site for such representations to be found. In this age of online newspapers, the number of articles that are centered on visual images—clickbait—means no “story” needs to be attached. A seemingly inconsequential family trip to the beach or the shops can include upward of 30 photos. For example, a family trip to the beach by actor Jamie Dornan, accompanied by his wife Amelia and infant daughter Dulcie, contains 36 photos and the “story” is a series of expanded picture captions.

Jamie Dornan is a former Calvin Klein underwear model turned actor, most famous for his role of Christian Grey in the film versions of the mummy-porn novels *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Whilst his role as the SBDM-obsessive Grey undoubtedly shades our reading of his body, the way that this is represented in this and other media articles clearly identifies it with his fatherhood. In this article from the *Daily Mail* (Thomas, 2015), the main clickbait picture shows Dornan in beach-appropriate swimming shorts, Ray-Bans, and carrying his 22-month-old daughter as he walks along a populated beach. The headline “Shirtless hunk Jamie Dornan shows off his rippling muscles as he enjoys beach holiday in Ibiza with his wife Amelia Warner and daughter Dulcie” highlights his body’s muscularity, both in terms of referring to him as a “hunk” and then more compartmentalized in terms of his “rippling muscles.” He is the active agent in this, “showing off” his body. This physical description is contrasted in the opening sentence, “But Jamie Dornan was poles apart from his dark and dangerous alter-ego on holiday in Ibiza, looking every inch the devoted family man.” The article continues to contrast his sexualized body with his fatherhood role, in picture captions such as “Fifty Shades of Grey hunk Jamie Dornan was every inch the doting dad as he cradled his daughter Dulcie during a family holiday outing in Ibiza.” Here, the collocation of sexualized film role is made with his own body—“hunk”—whilst contrasting this with the description of him as a “doting dad” who “cradles” his daughter. The verb “cradle” is most often associated with the act of nursing young babies in an intimate, tender manner. However, in the associated photograph, Dulcie is shown to be alert and engaged with her surroundings, not resting in Dornan’s arms in a resting or sleeping position. This strategy of placing the father in a more tender and protective frame in contrast to a powerful, sexualized bodily description is frequently found in such media reporting of men. For example, actor James Van Der Beek, is described in another article (Carpenter, 2016) as not carrying his infant daughter but using “his bulging bicep to gently haul their four-month-old princess resting in her carrier.” Like the fragmentation of women’s bodies, reduced to legs and breasts, the sexy dad is most frequently reduced to his biceps. His excessively powerful form of masculinity, the

heroic masculinity of the sexy dad, is emphasized by the choice of “gently haul,” the verb “haul” usually carrying an association of great physical effort, here being softened by “gently.” The baby, in turn, is given a fairy tale framing through being referred to as a “princess” who is “resting” in the manner of Sleeping Beauty. The clickbait photo for this article does not actually show anything of the baby so there is no indication of whether or not she is even asleep, but instead is being used to highlight the way in which the father can be framed to appear in this heroic, sexualized way. The photo clearly shows Van Der Beek, who is carefully styled as a Wayfarer-wearing young man with gym-honed muscles visible beneath his fitted t-shirt.

However, former footballer David Beckham is, undeniably, the prototype DILF. Since his first child was born in 2000, there have been thousands of news reports that feature him carrying or hugging his children, and countless magazine articles have juxtaposed his gym-honed body with his caring, hands-on fatherhood status. As a prolific user of social media, Beckham himself has posted intimate photos of his family life. These photos have been rearticulated in line with the sexualized male image. For example, a photo he posted on Instagram in Easter 2017 of him hugging his daughter was widely reproduced with captions along the lines of “Hunky David Beckham shows off his toned and tattooed arms in sweet snap with daughter Harper, 5.” As with the Jamie Dornan article mentioned earlier, Beckham is the active agent who is “showing off,” his body fragmented in terms of its hypermasculine “toned and tattooed arms.” Once again, this is contrasted with the “sweetness” of the interaction with his young daughter.

As Jane Sunderland found in her study of fatherhood in the media (2004), the act of childcare was often glossed as “nappy changing,” but I suggest that here we can see it has morphed into something that allows for the demonstration of the buff male body: the physical act of carrying or holding the child. This is contrasted with the tender and nurturing description of intimate acts of childcare.

This convergence of factors—feminism, gym culture, the mainstreaming of pornography—all add up to the emergence of the sexualized father figure. It seems that men now feel that they can freely discuss their roles as hands-on father, with the associated change in lifestyle and life expectations, and often with a sense of playful antiheroic incompetence. This is something we see in self-presentations of images posted on personal social media accounts and in interviews, as we saw with Chris Hemsworth earlier. However, the secondary mediated form of this seems drawn to the sexualization of the man for a readership familiar with the display of the male body for female pleasure. Sometimes this is through a rearticulation of these self-presentations, such as in the case of the David Beckham’s Instagram posts discussed above. At other times, this is through apparently “snatched” shots of fathers caring for their children, as with many of the DILFS of Instagram images and perhaps more knowingly in the case of the images of Jamie Dornan. Nevertheless, there is an undoubted shift in the presentation of masculinities associated with fatherhood, with hyperbole and playfulness underpinning much of this.

SEE ALSO: Gender and Media; iegmc035; Body image, theories; iegmc057; iegmc084; Women’s Pornography Cultures; iegmc137; Fathers in the Media; Advertising Masculinities

iegmc016  
iegmc035  
iegmc056  
iegmc057  
iegmc084  
iegmc098  
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## Further Reading

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#### ABSTRACT

This entry will explore how fatherhood can be articulated as both an opportunity for men to demonstrate their caring, nurturing side, whilst also being a site for sexual desirability, popularly referred to as the "DILF." The "new man" masculinity that emerged in the 1990s will be drawn on in respect of how this came to be linked with the popularizing of female-directed pornography around the same time, finally merging in the 21st century as the "sexy dad." By drawing on various media texts relating to fatherhood, this entry will show how there is a self-presentation of fatherhood that is largely in line with the caring, emotional "new man," but at times wittily espousing a playful form of macho masculinity linked with gym culture. This is contrasted with the media interpretation of such fatherhood that seeks to sexualize the male body in the popular press. The discussion finds that the act of carrying or holding a child becomes a site for these two discourses to meet, both in the visual images used to illustrate stories and in the associated text.

#### KEYWORDS

DILF; fatherhood; masculinities; sexualization