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## The Changing American Family

The demonstration of the traditional modern family within the media is constantly changing. The media influences society to believe there is a single definition for the average American family. Television is a major influence on today's society, providing entertainment that outlines American culture. A comedic approach has been taken to reflect family values through the use of situation comedy (sitcoms).

A sitcom is centered around a fixed set of characters that carry over between episodes (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2018). *Father Knows Best* and *Modern Family* are two well-known sitcoms in North America, both outlining the traditional American family in their time. The ideal father figure is drastically changing from 1950 to now. Jim Anderson's very involved, strict attempt at fathering contrasts with Phil Dunphy's relaxed, 'cool-dad' approach; showing the distinct change in fathering techniques over the years.

*Father Knows Best* is a televised comedy series largely popular in the 1950's. The first episode aired on October 3rd, 1954 (IMDb, 2018); running through six seasons before coming to an end. The series is based on a middle class family, living in Springfield- the average small town America. Jim Anderson and his wife Margaret are the 'perfect' parents of Betty, Bud, and Kathy. Jim is the head of the house; working as a successful salesman. While Margaret stays at home; mothering the house. In the 1950's, it is very common for the husband to be a working man and have a housewife to come home to. The Anderson's are the perfect nuclear family; designed for viewers to relate to. Each family member has a role to play and a prospective future for them. In "Lesson in Citizenship" (James, 1954): the second episode of the first season of *Father Knows Best*, Jim educates his children on the importance of good citizenship. Jim comes home from a day of work to Margaret asking their children to help prepare for dinner. Betty, Bud, and Kathy are all lounging about in their living room, not doing what their mother asks of them. He is unimpressed with their behaviour and encourages them to help around the community. "Don't you kids realize that the habits you form here at home are the ones you take with you in your community life? A good citizen doesn't shirk his duty, he does his share to help others" (00:02:07-00:02:17).

Jim is directly involved in shaping Betty, Bud, and Kathy, stressing the importance of being a good citizen. Jim takes a strict approach in raising his children to become good citizens, maintaining his role as father of the house.

There has been significant shift in the representation of the traditional American Family in the media. *Modern Family* is a popular television show on ABC Family, debuting in September of 2009 (IMDb, 2018). It is a 'mockumentary' that centres around three different- but related- families in their everyday lives. Phil and Claire are raising their three children: Haley, Alex, and Luke. They are always running around, trying to keep up with the fast-paced millennial lifestyle. Claire's father Jay, marries a younger Colombian woman named Gloria, and adopts care of her son from a previous marriage: Manny. Claire's brother Mitchell and his partner Cameron adopt their daughter Lily from Vietnam; completing one big complicated family. The creators of the show have created a world that exposes the difficulty that comes with parenting. Phil and Claire are presented with many challenges while raising three children. Their eldest daughter Haley is

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their biggest concern; as she is coming into womanhood. This is challenging for some parents; unsure of how to approach the situation. In the first episode of the first season, "Pilot" (Winch, 2009), Haley comes downstairs wearing a skirt deemed inappropriate by her mother. Claire tells her "wow, you're not wearing that outfit" (00:00:23-00:00:24). When she doesn't listen, Claire asks Phil "do you have anything to say to your daughter about her skirt?" (00:00:26-00:00:28). Phil responds by telling Haley "that looks really cute, sweetheart" (00:00:30-00:00:31), encouraging her to keep the short skirt on despite her mother's disapproval. Phil's approach to parenting is very relaxed. He wants to maintain a good relationship with his kids, and in doing so he rarely disciplines them.

Due to the significant shift in the representation of the traditional American family, *Father Knows Best* and *Modern Family* have significant contrasting ideals. In *Father Knows Best*, Jim is the disciplinarian of the household; emphasizing what it truly means to be a man and a woman in society. When his children disobey their mother, he has her back and teaches them a lesson. He may work as a salesperson, though his primary job is being a father to his children. In today's *Modern Family*, Phil Dunphy is absent in the discipline of his children; forcing his wife Claire to be the strict parent. When the Dunphy children fail to listen to Claire, she turns to Phil for support. However, Phil wants to maintain a good relationship with his children, keeping his title as 'The Cool Dad'. Thus, all disciplinary tasks are in Claire's hands. This allows Phil to still be known as "The Cool Dad", and keep the friendly relationship he has with his children. Through the analysis of the contrasting elements of *Father Knows Best* and *Modern Family*, it is easy to see how drastically the idea of a traditional father figure has changed.

The definition of a traditional father figure is constantly changing. *Father Knows Best* outlines discipline as a priority in parenting techniques. Contrary to *Modern Family*, while discipline is still a priority but the line between parenting and friendship is not as distinct.