

Essay:

**A Battle of Ideologies: The Clash of Domesticated Dads in *Family Ties* “Be True to Your  
Preschool” (1986)**

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In her essay titled “I Can’t Help Feeling Maternal—I’m A Father: Domesticated Dads and Career Women”, Alice Leppert argues how different sitcoms of the 1980s modeled a new image of the family narrative in which women were depicted prioritizing their careers and home life, with the image of masculinity shifting by depicting men taking on a more domesticated role. Leppert states “sitcoms promote a masculine subjectivity that embraces domesticity and child-rearing.”<sup>1</sup> This quote suggests domesticated dads represented an entirely new form of masculinity with valued qualities traditionally associated with women, including caregiving and nurturing. In the episode “Be True to Your Preschool” from *Family Ties* (Gary David Goldberg, Paramount, 1982 - 1989), we see a parental battle between Alex (Michael J. Fox) and his dad, Steven Keaton (Michael Gross), who represent a clash between conservative and progressive beliefs respectively. They both take on the role of the domesticated dad in different ways. Steven is one who takes over domestic tasks, as seen in his attempts to create family unity by making large meals for everyone. Despite Alex completely disagreeing with the idea of the domesticated dad, he ends up unintentionally becoming a fatherly figure in his protective, authoritative, and

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Leppert, *TV Family Values: Gender, Domestic Labor, and 1980s Sitcoms* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 28.

educational aspirations for Andy. We see an interesting problem: both men demonstrate what a “dad” represents in their own way, but in their attempts to overachieve, they both end up failing in these roles.

Contrary to Leppert’s claim that shows such as *Family Ties* presented a romanticized, albeit non-traditional, family norm, the family image portrayed is far from perfect. As Leppert argues, “the programs grapple with real, familiar problems encountered by dual-career couples, they present fantasies of shared domestic work, mutual sacrifice, and children happy to pitch in.”<sup>2</sup> While this may be true in other episodes, I disagree that this episode depicts any sort of domestic fantasy, challenging Leppert’s claims as a universal truth. Elyse Keaton's (Meredith Baxter) career prevents shared domestic responsibilities, with Steven taking care of the house and making most of the sacrifices in this episode. We see him doing all of the cooking for the family with Elyse usually entering the scene to simply check on him and say hi before the focal point of the episode shifts to another conversation. For example, in the beginning when Steven is making breakfast, we see Elyse briefly before she sits at the table and starts eating. The conversation then shifts to Steven talking to Alex and Jennifer who cannot eat because they have prior commitments. This brings into question an additional discussion point of how even though Steven is the epitome of the domesticated dad, he still remains a traditional fatherly figure because he is the one exerting his authority on the children, questioning why they are not eating with the rest of the family. The only time the audience truly sees potential “fantasies” is in the opening song. The opening seconds of the episode demonstrate the “perfect family image” with a framed photo of the entire family smiling widely (Figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup> Leppert, 29.



Figure 1: The opening credits to *Family Ties*. NBC, 1986.

Following this, the show's intro presents a montage of scenes, including a scene where one of the daughters is helping cook dinner, naturalizing the argument of children happy to pitch in for shared tasks of domesticity around the house. Steven and Elyse are shown kissing, a physical indicator of their romantic relationship, enhanced by the background music and lyrics. The intro song alternates between a man and woman singing, adding an element of partnership and camaraderie. The song, combined with the choice of blocking and editing of the montage provides a perfect example of the ideological idea of the proper "family fantasy" as described by Leppert. Even though the introduction song illustrates Leppert's argument, and points to the ideological position the show wants the audience to believe, it is important to note and understand that this song is played before every episode. Besides the introduction, "Be True to Your Preschool" is an exception because it does not follow the traditional "family fantasy" in which Leppert describes. Instead, Leppert's acknowledgement of feminist critic perspectives align more closely to the overarching ideology of the episode. Leppert acknowledges Kies claims regarding how "the focus on domesticated dads marginalized women" therefore removing them

from “a television genre that had historically been dedicated to depicting feminine labor.”<sup>3</sup> One of the best examples is how Elyse is barely in this episode. The only time where she has a main dialogue in the scene is when she questions why Jennifer (Tina Yothers) is going out on a school night when she should be eating with the family and studying. Even though the career woman is a revolutionary theme in television and society, especially during the 80s, rather than her being the focal point of the episode, she fades into the background. Because Elyse is almost completely removed from the episode, this allows for Alex and Steven’s roles to emerge as the fighting parents.



Figure 2: Steven and Elyse sit at the kitchen table. Steven wears an apron, signifying domesticity, while Elyse wears a suit with the sleeves rolled up, signifying her role as a career woman. NBC, 1986.

Steven's failure as an authoritative fatherly figure is evident in his imposition of his own education expectations on Alex, causing tension over what's best for Andy's education. As Leppert states, “these domesticated dads functioned [as] models for a new masculine ideal that privileged traditional ‘feminine’ characteristics such as nurturance and family care.”<sup>4</sup> Despite

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<sup>3</sup> Leppert, 57.

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Alex's ideology being much more conservative than his family's beliefs, he takes on the role of a domesticated dad unintentionally by being an educator and teacher to Andy. This is demonstrated through Alex's constant battle with educational ideology throughout the episode, most apparent in the dialogue between him and Andy when Andy is taking care of a doll and putting on a diaper on it (Figure 3). Alex asks Andy "Where's your wife?" to which Andy immediately responds with "Out working".



Figure 3: Andy roleplays domestic tasks with a baby doll in preschool, likely mirroring the actions of Steven, much to the dismay of Alex. NBC, 1986.

Alex grabs Andy after he hears this, saying "We're out of here. Let's go." as he carries him out the door. The quick exit Alex takes from the preschool suggests he is not okay with the way in which Andy's preschool runs things, as the preschool takes on a more progressive lens, assuming that both men and women can have a career and take care of the kids. This interaction at the preschool also subverts Alex's beliefs, naturalizing that what he believes is abnormal. This leads Alex to taking matters into his own hands and exude what little control he has for the situation to have a false sense of control of what Andy believes in. We see this in the culmination

in the “battle of the dads” face-off where Steven and Alex have a discussion regarding why Andy isn’t in preschool anymore. Steven criticizes Alex for pulling Andy out of preschool, especially without permission, exclaiming “The Harper Preschool is the best in the area. It’s a humanistic approach to childcare based on affection, mutual understanding, and respect. Granted, you have no regard for these things, but other members of our species cling blindly to them.” Steven’s use of the word “humanistic” implies that Alex’s educational methods wouldn’t be human, and therefore wrong. Steven’s emphasis on how the preschool is the best of the area, then listing exactly what makes this school the “best” illustrates how this preschool is the best in the eyes of the parents simply because it aligns with the ideological beliefs they believe and want Andy to learn. Steven adds the dig of “you have no regard for these things” towards Alex because he knows those fundamental values are against Alex’s personal opinions. While it seems like Steven has won this debate and fulfilled his role of being a domesticated dad, later on we see this isn’t the case. Alex not only ends up being very popular with the kids as seen when they dog pile on him after his lesson, but he’s then offered a weekly teaching spot. Despite Andy being back at preschool and fulfilling the parents’ wishes, the material he’s learning is in more alignment with Alex’s wishes, creating a very interesting conversation about who is winning and failing as a dad in this episode. This interaction and difference of opinion further illustrates how even though both Steven and Alex want Andy to receive a good and proper education, their definitions of good and proper are completely different.

Alex's unwavering adherence to conventional values clashes with the rest of the family, adding to the ideological tensions in the household. After Alex pulls Andy out of preschool, he sits Andy down to watch a dollhouse re-enactment between Alex and Jennifer of what home life “should” look like. This demonstration backfires because Jennifer’s responses are the complete

opposite of Alex's beliefs, furthering the tension between the two different sets of ideological opinions. Alex tells Jennifer the objective of this exchange: "The important thing is to deprogram Andy before anything he learns at preschool sinks in... We're going to show how a normal family functions." Alex believes the preschool must have brainwashed Andy into thinking society allows a woman to work and a man to take care of the children, highlighting the extreme views he holds about gender roles, which he perceives as unacceptable. This suggests that the brainwashing from the school, combined with Alex's rigid beliefs, makes it difficult for him to accept societal changes regarding gender roles, leading to challenges in his parental role. He starts the reenactment for Andy by asking "What were you doing today while I was out there working to support you?" Jennifer quickly responds "I had an affair with the milkman" to which Alex responds after regaining his composure, "That's very funny dear. Does that mean you didn't make any dinner for your husband even though I was slaving away at the office?" These two lines of dialogue show the increased tension between Jennifer and Alex, and it is important to discuss the emotional reaction Alex has throughout this exchange. Alex believes that women should remain in the home, maintaining the patriarchal ideology of society. Jennifer believes women should be allowed to do what they want, rather than what a male-dominated society expects or wants from them. He wants Jennifer to be on his side, go along with his little game, and reinforce his ideas so Andy will be convinced this interaction is the norm. Jennifer responds with, "At least you get paid. Housework is just as tough as your job and I don't get a dime." Quickly, Alex gathers up the dollhouse and says "If you can't play nicely, then let's not play at all."



Figure 4: Alex, the conservative stand-in. NBC, 1986.



Figure 5: Steven, the progressive stand-in. NBC, 1986.

Two things are happening here: one, the difference in language. I find it interesting Alex would say something like “slaving away” in the office, which connotes working extremely hard, for work he does not want to do and is forced to do against his will. Jennifer does not add any sort of rhetoric in order to leverage her argument and says it simply: women do all of the work and do not get anything, not even a thank you. Secondly, Alex quickly picks up the toys while saying his line “If you can’t play nicely, then let’s not play at all”. This line serves as a coverup for what he is really trying to say, which is that Jennifer isn’t playing the “correct” way as in the



way he wants. Alex wants to end the conversation because his message is not being communicated in the way he wants Andy to understand. This exchange naturalizes the cultural assumption that women are expected to go along with what the “man of the household.” Alex in this case, is saying, even though it’s very clear Jennifer doesn’t agree and has verbalized this several times, which is why he ended this demonstration in the first place. This interaction eliminates the entirety of what the domesticated dad persona is because we are seeing traditional gender roles emerge. Despite Alex’s ideology not being the majority in the grand scheme of the episode as seen with his interactions thus far, this ideology is being naturalized as normal to Andy.



Figure 6: Andy, blissfully unaware of the conflicting societal expectations that are being conflated on him. NBC, 1986.

In conclusion, "Be True to Your Preschool" serves as an example of the evolving family dynamics and shifting gender roles of the 80s. This essay highlights the show's portrayal of a new image of the family narrative, where domesticated dads and the definition of masculinity challenged traditional gender roles. The episode juxtaposes the domestic responsibilities of the characters, with the battle of the domesticated dad as seen in the tension and difference of ideology with Alex and the rest of the family. The contrasting conservative perspective embodied

by Alex adds an additional layer to the narrative. The episode and show overall provides a lens of extra complexity in understanding the multifaceted nature of ideological norms, as well as the evolution and judgment of individual beliefs in a rapidly changing societal landscape.

Works Cited

Leppert, Alice. *TV Family Values: Gender, Domestic Labor, and 1980s Sitcoms*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019.