

## Television Sitcoms Focusing More on Single Dads

by Lisa Ann Williamson  
Staten Island Adance

Mike Connors tried to block out 30 minutes on a recent Monday night to watch a television program about a single father. But then his own kids needed to go to the doctor. He tried again a week later, but household chores, school projects and supper came first.

The reality of being a single custodial parent has left Connors with little time to watch a small-screen version of his life – though, if time permitted, there would be five possibilities to choose from this season.

Single dads were a hot ticket this fall on television. Although the majority of single parents are moms by a six to one ratio, when it comes to TV, "single moms are old hat," said Thomas Coleman, Executive Director of the American Association for Single People based in Glendale, Calif. "Viewers like novelty and media is looking for new stories."

The small-screen switch to single dads was triggered by a report issued by the U.S. Census in June of 2000 which reported that 2.2 million fathers were caring for children without a mother present. That's more than a 60 percent jump from a decade before and experts say the numbers continue to rise.

"That certainly put a focus on single dads and probably gave television producers some ideas," said Coleman.

The concept of having a single father at the center of a program is hardly new.

"The Courtship of Eddie's Father," "My Three Sons" and "Family Affair" were also single dad shows that aired in the 1960s and '70s. But society has changed. The fathers depicted in the shows of decades gone by were all widowers with live-in help. Today's TV dads are a mixture of divorcee and widower. They focus not only on raising children and the accompanying issues that process entails, but in maneuvering personal lives in a society where rules have changed.

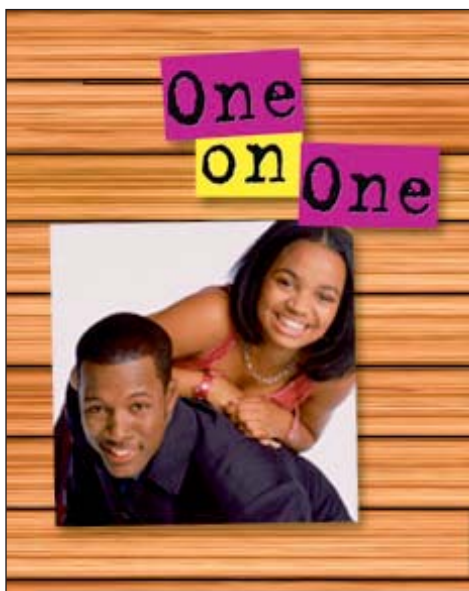
Connors thinks the TV versions are a sorry substitute for real-life single dads. And judging from the ratings of the

single-dad offerings, most Americans agree. In fact, two of the five shows, "Danny" and "Citizen Baines," both airing on CBS, have already been cancelled.



As a family, we "haven't watched television together in a long time," said Connors, 43, a divorced father raising three children, ages 9, 10 and 13. "We're usually doing homework or getting ready for the next day. It's really hard to juggle things. You have no idea."

Network executives tried mightily to



give the country a small glimpse into the lives of some single fathers. They offered Flex Washington, a divorced sportscaster with a teen-age daughter in "One on One" Mondays on UPN. Washington and his dad are raising his daughter.

Then there's Bob Saget who stars in "Raising Dad" Fridays on WB. His character, Matt Stewart, is a widower and

high school English literature teacher with two daughters.

Saturdays on CBS, the former Senator Baines (James Cromwell) adjusts to life after losing his bid for re-election and tries to connect with his three grown daughters in "Citizen Baines."

CBS also airs "The Education of Max Bickford," which was filmed in part on Staten Island, on Sundays. Max Bickford (Richard Dreyfuss) is a college professor with two children, one school-age son and a college-age daughter, struggling to navigate the changing climate of his college campus and his career.

Television programs like these have often been a way to teach, said Eleanor Rogg, sociology professor at Wagner College.

TV can be "a good, non-threatening way of showing people ways to handle situations and how to have a good family life. The shows this season allow us to look at several dads at different stages of life. We watch the mutual learning that goes on being fathers and children while the dads work on daily living," she explained.

But Connors said he's learned very little. "I would like it to see realistic shows that deal with deeper issues," Connors said.

He is looking for shows that deal with subjects like relationships with the non-custodial parent, juggling joint custody arrangements, maneuvering through the legal system and dating in middle age with children.

"One reality of television is that people want to watch a character that's like them," Coleman admitted.

For Connors, the TV characters are too one-dimensional. He believes the role of "father" is much more hands on and a whole lot harder than what's being portrayed. The Travis resident works 12-hour shifts for the Port Authority.

He'd like to see a television character who can handle all that. "I don't know, maybe it would have to be a movie," Connors laughed. ♪♪