

Animated shows can be a reflection of real life and culture which changes as the generations pass. And this in turn can reveal a lot about parents. I've been a dad for five years now and I want to explore how cartoon dads have changed over the years and the real life dads they're based on.

Obviously real life fathers and father-figures are complex and not something you can sum up with sweeping stereotypes and generalisations, but their animated and often parodied counterparts may reveal some relatable qualities that a generation of dads can share, even if it's not the full picture.

Dads from The Silent Generation tend to be portrayed as the stoic, pipe-smoking, upstanding citizen, who is always there with the moral lessons and an unhealthy amount of unchecked suppressed emotions. We only typically see these types of dads in parodies. This may also manifest as the war veteran who tends to be very masculine, overly strict and to some degree is still at war.

The Baby Boom Generation inherits some of the strict order of "this is the way it must be done" from their predecessors, hence their struggle to adapt to cultural shifts, but with a little bit of hippy influence, Boomers were more defiant of their parents. And one big example of a Boomer subverting the tropes of the 50s Father, is Homer Simpson.

The Simpsons has a kinda floating timeline, Homer was a teenager in the 1970s but somehow also the 90s, but he was at least originally designed to be a Boomer. Without that veil of "father knows best", we learnt they're just as flawed as the rest of us. It's humanising and refreshing. But this is where we start to see this shift towards fathers being stereotyped as being useless. Homer is capable of demonstrating grand gestures of wholesome fatherhood, especially at the end of the episode, but when the next episode starts, he defaults back to his useless bumbling self again. While it's perfect for comedy, the persistence of the bumbling dad trope even today can create a cruel and unfair assessment of fathers.

By rebelling against the 50s style of patriarchal households and kids raised through hard discipline, Boomers gave their kids freedom to go out and scrape their knees, staying out until the street lights turn on, and letting kids just be kids, for better or worse.

Generation X were the MTV Generation, accused of being slackers, but were generally very self sufficient. Nicknamed the latchkey generation due to them having their own doorkeys thanks to a rise of divorce rates and both parents needing to go to work. This aimless independence, mixed with the shifting cultures, led to Gen X being perceived as bleak, cynical and disillusioned. The Forgotten Generation. This pessimism may continue into their parenting, influencing their animated counterparts. They're no less loving characters, but may come across as long-suffering or sarcastic.

Alternatively, while Boomers introduced the concept of a more nurturing unified family like involving the kids in decisions of family matters, Generation X took this further by playing a heavy part in their child's development with the infamous helicopter parenting. So we'd get fathers portrayed as overly-involved in a kid's life, often uninvited, and leading to disastrously embarrassing results.

None of these personality traits aren't exclusive to these generations in real life, obviously, but it's interesting to see how the animated shows simplify and exaggerate the portrayal of these generations, especially in how the parents parent.

The children that followed Gen X are often accused of being even more self-centred due to the obsession with technology and the rise of the internet, but this connectivity has resulted in a generation a lot more community and socially conscious. The Millennials.

Which in turn brings us to Millennial parents. Like me. What do millennial cartoon dads look like?

Bluey is a hugely successful kids show about a family of dogs, but its real secret isn't its bright colours and vivid Australian setting. The secret is it's not just a kids show. It's a parents show too, and I have found my spirit animal in the father of the family, Bandit. He is the Fun Dad.

Here's what the experts say Millennial parents do, and how Bluey tackles it:

1 - CREATIVITY

Something Millennial parents do is provide their kids the space to be creative. Bluey celebrates this with the emphasis on the importance of play.

Unlike other shows of its kind, when imagination play happens they're not taken to some fantasy world - it's almost always kept grounded in reality, so you can see how the parents really play with the kids. Play and make-believe games not only encourages creativity but it's academically proven [1] to be hugely important to a child's development, such as emotional intelligence and language skills. [2]

But it can be hard for a parent to pull themselves away from house-work and job-work to dedicate time for play. Bandit regularly struggles to work before being roped into a game. But even if he despairs over the choice of game, he still does it.

While millennial fathers and mothers are more capable of dividing the workload of job, life and kids more equally, research shows father-play tends to be more physical, boisterous and rough-and-tumble such as chasing games. And mothers do this too. [3] Bandit is frequently playing games involving physical play which research shows helps children control their aggression. If the game goes too far, children learn how they should respond but in a safe environment, lessons which they can then carry into their everyday life. [4] When Bandit plays too aggressively with his youngest daughter Bingo, they learn together what their boundaries are without diminishing the play time.

[1]

<https://theconversation.com/making-up-games-is-more-important-than-you-think-why-bluey-is-a-font-of-parenting-wisdom-118583>]

[2]

<https://theconversation.com/making-up-games-is-more-important-than-you-think-why-bluey-is-a-font-of-parenting-wisdom-118583>

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1016165.pdf>

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/imhj.21682>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03004430.2017.1314274?journalCode=gecd20>]

[3]

<https://www.the-father-hood.com/article/new-study-confirms-dads-need-to-be-more-like-bandit-when-playing-with-kids/>]

[4

<https://www.the-father-hood.com/article/new-study-confirms-dads-need-to-be-more-like-bandit-when-playing-with-kids/>]

2 - EXPRESSION

Millennial parents are also more open-minded than prior generations, giving children the freedom to explore and express themselves, without imposing conformity, finally beginning to eradicate the “this is the way it must be done” mantra that has kept kids in the closet, slowly whittled away by the generations.

Bluey has been criticised for its lack of diversity, such as its LGBT representation, not by those who dislike the show but its fans. Those who celebrate the show and only want to see get more even enriched. [1] If it's going to be a slice-of-life show set in the modern world, then we should see more of the modern world.

Bluey isn't afraid to tackle complex subjects. One episode centres around the mum's sister who is alluded to being infertile. In another instance, where the kids put on a play enacting their mum's life, they use a balloon to represent pregnancy, leading to- [pop]

The gesture, expressions and dead silence has had led many adult fans to theorise that Bluey is a “rainbow baby”, a child born following a miscarriage. Charlie Aspinwall, the co-founder of Ludo Studio, the production company behind Bluey, stated: “We always write something for the adults and then something for the kids. So you can interpret that how you want to”. [2]

This freedom of expression also lends itself to exploring complex emotions. One episode begins with Bluey imitating her father, a game of repeating back what he says and does. But the game is interrupted when they encounter an injured bird. Bandit does everything he can, but sadly the bird dies. Bluey struggles with how to feel. So she continues the game. She pretends to discover the bird and seeks aid, mimicking her father's care and tenderness, even going so far as to intentionally steer the story to a sad ending. Bluey uses playtime as a form of therapy, to process emotions in a safe space to make peace with them and the parents contribute to the performance under their child's direction. Her expressed feelings and emotions are made valid. Very Gentle Parenting.

[1

<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2021/04/15/bluey-cartoon-diverse-characters-disabled-queer-gender-diverse-dogs/>]

[2 <https://inews.co.uk/culture/television/revealed-how-bluey-was-saved-and-will-never-grow-old-1752452>]

3 - INDEPENDENCE

What's often cited with Millennials is Free Range Parenting, and it's basically the opposite of Helicopter Parenting. It encourages more independence by giving children more tasks and responsibilities. In Bluey we see the kids help out with housework and are even allowed to play in the front garden almost unsupervised. This means not only do kids learn about trust, but so do the parents.

Free Range Parenting is also controversial, as kids as young as 9 or 10 journey alone, critics consider it a form of dangerous neglect.

Actually it's not too dissimilar to Boomer parents letting kids play out till late.

So it can be taken to extremes but responsibilities can be done in other ways.

Bluey's parents may help initiate a game, but then they back away and let the kids carry on which can help develop their problem solving skills. And Bandit loves inventing problems for them to solve.

In one episode Bandit teaches the kids to value the reward of hard work by acting like a limp ragdoll. Leaving the kids with a series of problems to figure out how to move their dad around and get a well-earned ice cream.

In another, Bluey struggles to ride her bike straight away and they observe other kids also struggling with their problems. Bluey offers to help, but Bandit tells her to step back and see how they can solve it by themselves. Their creative solutions give her the encouragement to not give up so fast. And Bandit didn't even have to stand up. Series creator Joe Brumm said of this episode: "If there is any type of message, it's aimed at the adults rather than the kids." It's a delicate balance of giving children just enough guidance to get started and with encouragement, let them figure it out on their own. Trust them.

This autonomy should extend to the parents too, such as having healthy mental space. And accepting responsibility. Millennial film-makers have led to a rise of films where parents realise their own wrongdoing and apologise to their children, perhaps an examination of generational trauma, a dissection of their own upbringing or self-reflection after having kids of their own. And if a parent cannot humbly accept when they are at fault, the child will justifiably feel unseen and unheard.

Seeing Bandit screw up and apologise for it, shows that not only is he able to be vulnerable and emotionally open to his children, but mistakes will happen and that's ok.

It can be difficult holding yourself up to the standards of idealised fictional characters. I love watching Bluey with or without my son, its a great show, for real life. But even as a millennial parent, I'm nowhere as good as Bandit. I know I can do more for my son, spend more time with him and play more games. It's hard when you hold yourself to such an impossible standard.

It makes me want to be better.

One day while we were out for a walk, my son picked up a rock. My instinct was to tell him to put it down. It might be dirty or he might throw it or he will slow down our walk just to pick up more random objects. But I stopped myself and thought - what would Bandit do. So instead of telling him to put the rock down, I praised my son for finding such a great rock! Let's go looking for more rocks on the way home. And now we have a collection.

We're only just beginning to see how the zoomer generation handle becoming parents, and the future is wide open for gen alpha to define themselves.

But in real life, dads can't be so neatly pigeonholed. They can be a mix of strict and kind, attached and detached, smart and not-so-smart. Generations can leapfrog and overlap each other, every dad is different.

Despite all the differences the dads have had across generations, I think there's two things most fathers have in common.

- 1) We're all still learning and figuring things out as we go along, and that's ok. So as long as I continue to try my best, maybe I can be just as good as the big blue dog from TV.
- 2) We all at one point definitely called the teacher "mum".