

Student 3: Low Merit

NZQA Intended for teacher use only

A common representation presented in sitcoms is that there is conflict between parents and their children, sending a message that 'parents don't understand their children', parents cannot or find it hard to relate to their children and that this is normal situation between parents and children. ①

I believe the representation of the message "parents don't understand their children" has formed in the family/comedy genre because sometimes there is this conflict between parents and children but in fact it is exaggerated for television in order to gain humour from the situation. No television programme can survive without conflict and this is one that is easily identifiable. According to Kira Birditt, a researcher at the University of Michigan for social research, a parent-child relationship is one of the longest lasting relationships people establish, because of this there is often a high amount of tension and ambivalence that goes along with the positive and supportive attributes of a parent-child relationship. This is useful for television producers who know they can use this type of conflict and it will appeal to a wide range of audience members. The message 'parents don't understand their children' is commonly shown through dialogue and actions. ④

We see in the texts I have studied that tension is often caused by parents wanting the best for their children. Psychology studies show that tension is often more upsetting towards the parents as they are more invested in the relationship and are concerned with launching their children into successful adulthood. This is where the root of this message is found in today's society. Parents want for their children what they didn't have when they were their age. Because of this they put a lot of pressure on their child/children. They can't see their child's aspirations past their own hopes and expectations. This is where parents tend to not understand their children. We see this idea in Little Miss Sunshine, directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. Richard clearly doesn't understand Olive as he is too caught up in the idea of winning, that he forgets that Olive is young and innocent and only really cares about having fun. Richard is oblivious to the fact that what you drill into your children when they are young makes a difference when they grow up. For example when Richard discourages Olive from eating ice cream before a beauty pageant as he sees it as an act of 'losing'. "When you eat ice cream the fat in the ice cream becomes fat in your body, so if you like ice cream you might become fat and if you don't, you'll stay nice and skinny sweetie," he continues on by asking 7 year old Olive "Okay Olive but let me ask you this, those women in Miss America, are they fat or skinny honey?" Olive not knowing how to react to this situation replies "they're skinny I guess", and Richard replies with his final blow "Yeah, I guess they don't eat a lot of ice cream." This demonstrates a situation where a parent does not know how to treat their child and has problems being empathetic. I believe Richard is trying to live his legacy through Olive as a "winner" so much that he can't see that all Olive really wants is for her family to be proud of her. ②

In 'Run for your wife' (Modern Family, season 1, episode 6) the representation of the idea of 'parents don't understand their children' is shown through an array of actions and dialogue. I think this idea is most prominent when Claire is yelling at Hailey whilst teaching her to drive. This stresses Hailey out and make driving a much more frustrating and tiring task than necessary. Claire doesn't understand that yelling at her children will ultimately cause resentment. "Yelling overpowers children, it makes them feel frustrated and angry, and what can happen is that after a while kids become immune to being yelled at. They tune it out,"

said Dr. Myrna B. Shure, a professor of psychology at Drexel University. This episode also displays another way parents don't understand their children. When children get to a certain age they want to feel independent from their parents, their ego is very delicate. This is where many children and parents clash. For example Hailey walking in front of her parents so she doesn't have to be seen with them. Claire and Phil perceive this as harsh and unnecessary but really its just Hailey trying to gain her independence and acceptance from her peers. When Claire tells Hailey that her driving instructor is picking her up from school, Hailey replies with "can't he pick me up someplace else, I don't want kids at school thinking I'm dating 40 year old driving instructor who's not even cute." Parents don't understand how children are afraid of being judged in a bad way by their peers and would rather point blank avoid situations that could possibly humiliate them.

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Another way in which this representation of parents not understanding children is in the portrayal of maturity levels. Parents often fail to realize that their children are significantly less mature than themselves and cannot be trusted to behave in a way that adults do. We see this through the actions and dialogue in 'Phil on wire' (Modern Family, Season 3, Episode 3). Claire gives her teenage girls Alex and Hailey a chance to be mature about being put in the same math class and to rise above the occasion to ultimately benefit each other. Claire expresses this idea as she scolds her children for not rising to her expectations. "I thought the two of you could understand how being in the same class would benefit you both, Alex you could tutor Hailey, Hailey you could help Alex with her social skills. Com on the two of you could have been super Dunphy's but instead what are you? Two bickering half Dunphy's and I'm the one who expected more." Phil and Claire don't understand that by taking away the independence that school creates in Hailey and Alex it can make them feel trapped and their family inescapable. If Claire had understood this she would have rang up the school's principal and asked for Hailey or Alex to move to another class so they did not feel like their independence was being taken away from them.

Due to parent's unconditional love and worry they have for their children, they put aside what their children want and force them into doing things they think will work out for them in the future. We can see that these representations do have some accuracy as Diane Swanbrow from the University of Michigan says when parents don't fully understand their children they are more likely to try and provide their children with unsolicited advice, which builds tension and resentment. Although the representation displays the truth of a real life problem it over exaggerates most of the time, this could ultimately lead to people who don't understand their children on a minor scale thing that they have done nothing wrong as they are only seeing the message represented on a large scale. This could reinforce that these differences, misunderstandings are a negative thing rather than what is considered by researchers such as Swanbrow and Birditt as being normal. Based on the evidence from the texts I chose I can conclude that 'parents don't understand their children' is in most parts based on what really can happen between parents and children but is over exaggerated and made to be more significant in order to get more humour out of situations.

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