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Section: PERSPECTIVE

Messing with Mother Nature for Mother Goose: THE MORALIST

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The Annotated Mother Goose includes this nursery rhyme: "First a daughter, then a son,
And the world is well begun." Another version of the traditional ditty appears on the
same page: "First a son, and then a daughter, You've begun just as you oughter."

In these simple rhymes resides a cultural message about the auspicious life: parent at least
one boy and one girl, in the proper order.

My mother gave birth to three healthy daughters, followed by three healthy sons. It all
happened naturally. The neighbors often told her how lucky she was to have such a large,
balanced family. Giving birth to all those girls first meant plenty of free baby-sitters for
all those boys.

When spawning offspring is left to chance, many families will fail to achieve the ideal
balance Mother Goose commends. They will wind up with only girls or only boys. The
baby in the family will be a boy instead of a girl. Unwilling to let nature have the last
word any more, people are turning to medical science for help.

Yet there are serious ethical drawbacks to messing with Mother Nature to satisfy Mother
Goose.

For about \$20,000 a service known as preimplantation genetic diagnosis is now widely
available in the United States through fertility doctors. Nearly 100 percent reliable, PGD
involves surgically removing eggs from a woman's ovaries, fertilizing them with sperm in
vitro, and checking a cell from each

of the resulting "test tube" embryos to see whether it carries a set of male or female
chromosomes.

PGD was originally used to help families avoid sex-linked genetic traits. Disorders like
cystic fibrosis, Tay-Sachs, Hunter syndrome, X-linked hemophilia and muscular
dystrophy can be detected in a cell in the earliest stages.

When PGD is used for sex selection, doctors insert some of the otherwise healthy

embryos of the desired sex in the woman's womb. Since more than one of the embryos may successfully implant, a woman who undergoes PGD can easily find herself pregnant with twins or triplets. She will then have the option to either carry the multiple pregnancy or "reduce" it - abort unwanted fetuses.

Embryos of the "wrong" sex typically get frozen for later reproductive or scientific uses. But they can be destroyed, if that's what the parents prefer.

Other medically assisted routes to sex selection have been available, including a sperm-sorting technique called "density gradient separation."

Exact statistics are not available, but by some accounts Americans go to sex selection doctors most often seeking girls. But if the freezer is the predominant fate of Americans' boy embryos, it is not because families prefer girls to boys absolutely. Americans tell sex-selection doctors that they want to balance their nuclear families.

The contemporary obsession with balancing is something of a mystery. Once upon a time, there was good reason to want a mix of both male and female children. More children meant more helping hands. Society dictated strict gender roles. Boys were needed to carry on the family name, inherit the land and make decisions. Girls were needed to manage the house, oversee social obligations and care for the young, sick and aged. In the past, wives more commonly died in childbirth. Given the importance of male heirs in a patriarchal society, "first a son and then a daughter" could be logically viewed as good fortune.

But today American women can inherit property, keep their fathers' names and make important decisions. Boys can care for children, write thank-you notes and shuttle grandparents to the doctor. So why are so many people paying hundreds, even thousands of dollars to select the sex of their offspring?

The answer may just be that cultural norms ossify, lingering long after they have lost their point. The idea of a balanced family makes us happy, because it spelled prosperity for our great-great grandparents from whom we inherited it. Family balance now is a mystical cultural preference, valued, but purposeless, due to changing sexual mores.

Hanging on to the old ways is often harmless. However, medically assisted high-tech sex selection raises large ethical issues.

To begin with, PGD involves creating human embryos, some of which will not be used by their parents for reproduction. Although embryos can be frozen and put to use for research and some can be "adopted" by infertile couples, each of these possibilities raises a host of moral and social questions.

Selection may be the first step on a slippery slope toward "designer babies." Parents, encouraged today to sex-select simply because it makes them happy, may someday want to use the fruits of genetic science to select the height, body type, hair color and eye color

of their children.

To some extent this is already happening. We are designing babies. Using donated sperm and eggs is now a routine practice. People select donated egg and sperm based on the race, IQ, SAT scores and detailed physical profiles of the donors.

Finally, what worries me the most is that sex selection plays into gender stereotypes and may throw off the societal, even global balance of males and females.

Sex selection is a kind of gender discrimination and could heighten problems of pernicious gender discrimination. Girls and boys are expected to have a specific range of attributes. Children who do not grow up with all the interests, habits, tastes and values they are expected to have are deemed disappointments, even embarrassments, by their parents and the wider society.

Supporters of sex selection sometimes argue that choosing a child's sex is a future parent's moral and legal right. As a lawyer, I take this claim seriously. The United States Supreme Court has placed the right of reproductive choice firmly in the hands of individuals. Women and men have a right to choose whether and when they bear children. Women can elect birth control and abortion, and government cannot compel sterilization.

The question is whether the principles announced in landmark abortion, birth-control and sterilization cases extend here. Do women and their partners, properly ascribed reproductive autonomy, have a right to use technologies that enable them to choose the sexes of their children?

I doubt that the principle of choice entails the right to elect all the options of a child's characteristics that technology can make possible. Certainly the Supreme Court has never made that determination; and it is far from clear it ever would. It should be constitutional to prohibit what is bad for children, for social order and population distributions on the planet.

I believe the use of PGD is ethical and should be legal when used for screening for tragic diseases representing extremes of suffering. Moreover, so much of the burden of caring for children with grave disabilities falls on private families that those families deserve choices. In Great Britain, where screening for sex selection is unlawful, screening for serious diseases is permitted.

Mother Goose influenced me, too. I confess to wanting my first child to be a girl. I planned to dress her in pretty clothes, braid her hair, then show her how to kick butt in school and the professions. Well, I got a boy first, and my disappointment lasted maybe two seconds.

Still, I wanted a girl, and eventually got one. But she won't let me pick out her clothing and fusses when I try to fix her hair. She aspires to be a homemaker, not a professional

like her lawyer parents.

I now believe parenting fantasies should be understood as just that - dreams and wishes that can look quaint, even silly, in the face of the true complexity and diversity of young humans. Parenthood is a gift for those willing to embrace it. It is also a responsibility. Being a parent requires a long lifetime of making vital choices for your children's welfare. But the choice between boy and girl is atypically vital and best left to chance.