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**Children to Order: The Ethics of ‘Designer Babies’**

FACT OUTLINE

**Introduction**

Creating designer babies who are free from disease and super athletic or smart may finally be around the corner. But American society hasn't fully thought out the ethical implications for the [future of baby making](http://www.livescience.com/2709-future-babies-artificial-wombs-pregnant-grandmas.html) or policies to regulate these techniques.

"We're on the cusp of having much more information, and the appearance of having much greater discretion, in choosing the traits of our [children](http://www.livescience.com/44087-designer-babies-ethics.html)," said Thomas H. Murray, a bioethicist at the Hastings Center. People also need to think about what parents and doctors will do with the technology, he said. "What use will they make of it, and should there be limits?"

**New technologies**

Since the 1990s, the prospect of futuristic technologies such as human cloning or selecting for superhuman traits have stoked public fears about "[designer babies](http://www.livescience.com/27206-genetic-engineering-babies-debate.html)."

Back then, most of these techniques were purely speculative, but now several methods for genetic selection are either already possible or will soon become so.

For instance, parents can choose to screen embryos created via in vitro fertilization (IVF) for sex or diseases, a process known as pre-implantation genetic diagnosis. Scientists have also recently reported a method of extracting defective mitochondria, the energy powerhouses of cells, from a woman's egg and replacing them with healthy [mitochondria from a donor egg](http://www.livescience.com/24249-gene-therapy-mitochondrial-disease.html). New tests can detect fetal DNA circulating in a woman's blood stream early on in pregnancy, determining sex or catching errors in the number of chromosomes.

Though parents may not be able to screen their future babies for [genes that can lead to intelligence](http://www.livescience.com/25190-genetic-roots-vertebrate-intelligence.html), hair color or athletic aptitude just yet, the company 23andme recently applied for a patent on such tests, the article notes. Soon it may be possible to screen the entire genome of a fetus, or to select a [child](http://www.livescience.com/44087-designer-babies-ethics.html) based on its odds of long-term diseases such as Alzheimer's or diabetes.

Ghose, Tia. "Children to Order: The Ethics of 'Designer Babies'" *LiveScience*. Purch, 13 Mar. 2014. Web. 5 Nov. 2015. <http://www.livescience.com/44087-designer-babies-ethics.html>.

**No consensus**

Many of the major medical societies have wildly different attitudes about when and where these techniques should be allowed. The ASRM typically defers to a client's wishes on issues such as sex selection, for instance, whereas the ACOG advocates prohibiting [sex selection](http://www.livescience.com/17941-female-fedicide-pregnancy-baby-sex.html) because of its potential to lead to sex discrimination against women in society.

FACT OUTLINE

The FDA, meanwhile, only regulates the potential safety and efficacy of these techniques, not their ethical implications.

But when bringing a new child into the world, society has an obligation to determine whether the technologies used to do so actually benefit or harm the infant. On a larger scale, it's possible that giving parents the ability to select the genetic traits of their offspring could worsen the relationship between parents and children.

**Fears overblown**

Not everyone thinks these ethical issues are so worrisome.

While safety, benefits and medical claims need to be evaluated, designer babies may not present such a new ethical arena, after all. It's not clear that there's anything unique, from an ethical perspective, in parents trying to select certain traits through genetics as compared to using tutors, music lessons or discipline. Even if there were some potential harms of "designer babies," those drawbacks may not be worth regulating.

If there were a family that really valued [musicality](http://www.livescience.com/39718-rhythmic-ability-linked-to-language-skills.html), for instance, and "if they have four embryos and one has the perfect pitch trait, then why should they not be able to choose that embryo?"

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SUMMARY:

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