



Policing Parents-to-be

Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent (<http://www.kent.ac.uk>)

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) has adopted the view that its principal mission should be to police potential parents of children born as a result of using reproductive technologies. The HFEA's report – Sex Selection: Options for Regulation – published in November 2003, recommended a ban on sex selection for social reasons. The committee clearly believes that parents who want to select the sex of their baby cannot be trusted to look after the best interests of their child.

Of course many members of the public disapprove of sex selection on moral grounds. They believe that parents' attempts to exercise choice over the composition of their family are playing God. Others claim that sex selection will encourage discrimination against girls because of an alleged preference for boys. Some have suggested that selection might 'upset the balance between sexes'.

The HFEA admits that these concerns do not provide a clear-cut case against selection. If arguments appealing to God's will were upheld, then to be consistent the Government would have no choice but to ban in vitro fertilisation (IVF), not to mention abortion and most forms of contraception. The HFEA also recognises that concerns about upsetting the balance between sexes are based on prejudice rather than fact. Research shows that British parents who wish to select the sex of their baby are just as likely to wish for a girl as a boy.

So why is the HFEA so hostile towards the idea of allowing parents the right to exercise control over their family life? The HFEA defends its decision on the ground that public opinion is overwhelmingly against sex selection. The HFEA's own poll shows that around 69 per cent of the respondents were against sex selection for social reasons. That means that around a third did not oppose parents' ability to balance their family. What this shows is not a public that is overwhelmingly morally outraged by sex selection but one that is divided, as it is on most issues to do with family life and reproduction. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the HFEA is hiding behind the cloak of public opinion to promote its newly developed illiberal agenda.

The principal reason why the HFEA opposes selection is because it believes that it knows better than parents what is in the best interest of their child. Its report states that 'the most persuasive arguments for access to sex selection technologies are related to the welfare of the children and families concerned'. It suggests that children born this way may be 'psychologically damaged' by the knowledge that they were selected for their sex.

Why children so intensely wanted by their parents would be damaged by the knowledge that they were desperately wanted has yet to be explained by the HFEA. Even more ludicrous is the HFEA's claim that sex-selected children would suffer from preconceived expectations, as their parents would try to mould them according to a stereotypical idea of how boys or girls ought to behave.

The argument that children should be given space to develop and not pressured into fulfilling their parents' expectations has been repeated time and again by the HFEA.

But exactly what is wrong with parental expectation? Parents throughout the ages have had clear expectations for their children and often did their best to ensure that their children fulfilled them. Family life always involves a creative interaction between the expectations of parents and children's independent aspirations. By turning parental expectation into a problem, the HFEA undermines the very foundation on which a creative family life can be conducted. Yes, there are pushy parents, but do we really want a regulatory body like the HFEA to dictate which parenting styles are acceptable and which are not?

The intention behind the setting up of the HFEA was not to police parents. It did not seek to sit in judgement over the relationship between parents and children. Sadly, in recent years the HFEA has adopted an illiberal approach that is deeply suspicious of parents attempting to exercise the right to choose.