

ANNA QUINDLEN Mother's Choice

from *The Aims of Argument: A Rhetoric + reader*
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As Betty Friedan notes in "The Half-Life of Reaction," many feminists in the 1960s and 1970s devalued the role of motherhood. Even in the 1980s, the "family values" decade, New York Times columnist Anna Quindlen felt she needed to defend her decision to quit working full-time so that she could stay home and raise her two small sons. In evaluating her purpose for writing, consider to what extent she uses her own experience to persuade other women to make the same choice she did.

I AM a mom. It's not all I am. But it's the identity that seems to cling to me most persistently right now, like ivy on the walls of an old stone house. Perhaps this is because, just over two years ago, I ditched a perfectly good full-time job in the office for two perfectly good part-time jobs at home, one writing, the other making Tollhouse cookies with assistants who always get eggshell in the batter and praising people who manage to go in the toilet one time out of three. It's a terrific life, but that's not how it's perceived by the outside world. When I quit the job that did not include eggshells and toilet training, there was a kind of solemn attitude toward what I was doing, not unlike the feeling people have about Carmelite nuns. People thought I was Doing the Noble Thing. They also thought I was nuts.

There are valid and complicated reasons why they were wrong, but they haven't been ventilated enough. There has always been a feeling on the part of moms that the Women's Movement has not taken them seriously, has in fact denigrated what they do, unless they do it in a Third World country or do it while running a Fortune 500 company and the New York marathon.

I once felt this same way about moms. Like almost everything else, this feeling had to do with the past. When I was growing up, motherhood was a kind of cage. The moms I knew had more children than they probably would have chosen, spaced closer together than they probably would have liked. Smart, dumb, rich, poor—as soon as you started throwing up in the powder room at parties and walking around in those horrible little pup-tent dresses your life was over. Your husband still went out every day, talked to other adults about adult things, whether it was the Red Sox bullpen or the price of steel. And you stayed home and felt your mind turn to the stuff that you put in little bowls and tried to spoon into little mouths and eventually wound up wiping off of little floors.

By the time I was a grown-up, the answer, if you were strong and smart and wanted to be somebody, was not to be a mom. I certainly didn't want to be one. I wanted my blouses to stay clean. I wanted my plants to have leaves. And I wanted to climb unencumbered up to the top of whatever career ladder I managed to cling to. The Women's Movement was talking about new choices. Being a mom was an old one, and one that reeked of reliance on a man and loss of identity. Yet a kind of choice was that? So I exchanged one sort of enforced role

for another, exchanging poor downtrodden mom, with Pabulum in her hair, for tough lonely career woman, eating take-out Chinese from the cardboard container. I was neither imaginative nor secure enough to start from scratch. So my choice wasn't about choice at all, only about changing archetypes.

I suppose I only really learned about choice when I chose to devote more of my time to a life I had previously misunderstood and undervalued: that is, when I became a mom. I was finally strong and smart enough to do something that left me vulnerable but made me feel terrific, too. I should say that it's challenging and invigorating, that the future of the next generation is in my hands. But that doesn't have much to do with my real life. About half of being a mom is just like being a mom was for my mother. It's exhausting and grungy and chaotic, and there's an enormous amount of sopping things up with paper towels and yelling things like "Don't you ever stick something like that in his ear again or I will throw you out the window!" It has nothing to do with Doing the Noble Thing.

(Here is the Noble Thing part, at least from a feminist perspective: I am raising boys here. I am teaching them to cook. I am making a game out of putting dirty clothes in the hamper. I am refusing to create Princes. If it kills me, I am going to make at least two sensitive, caring, honest individuals who know what to do with a wire whisk and what wash temperature permanent-press shirts require. Whose idea of the average woman is someone smart, aggressive, and mouthy, with her own surname and checking account.)

I wanted to be somebody, and now I am—several somebodies, to be exact. And one of them is Mom, who has job responsibility for teaching two human beings much of what they will know about feeling safe and secure, about living comfortably with other people, and with themselves. It's a job I'm good at, but that's not really why I chose it. I chose it because, while half of it is exhausting and maddening and pretty horrible, the other half is about as fun as anything has ever been in my life. Going to the playground, picking people up at school, reading "Curious George," a hundred thousand times, building castles at the beach, watching barber-shop haircuts in the mirror, making Tollhouse cookies, praising people who go in the toilet: For me, this is about as good as it gets. One of the reasons I became a feminist is because I really believe that, at some level, women are better. And lots of women realize that work is great and work is money and work is ego enhancing. But, at a certain point, it's simply work—no more, no less. They realize that when men are still developing strategies for their careers, along with clogged arteries.

I love my work. Always have. But I have another job now and it's just as good. I don't need anyone to validate me anymore with a byline or a bonus, which is a good thing, because this job still doesn't get much validation, at least until it's over and you've helped raise someone who isn't a cheat or a con man. I don't need validation. I'm having fun instead.

That's why I did what I did. I didn't do it for the kids. I did it for me. Isn't that what we feminists were supposed to be supporting, a little healthy selfishness? I didn't feel guilty about being away all day at work. I just knew I was missing the

best time of my life. Like today. Two guys asked me to have pizza and watch *Sleeping Beauty* with them. Do you remember how terrific *Sleeping Beauty* is, with those three fat little fairies named Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather? I could have been at the office, but instead I did the Noble Thing: two slices with extra cheese and a long discussion of the difference between enchanted sleep and death.

Questions for Discussion

1. In paragraphs 3 and 4, Quindlen presents the opposing view to her position—reasons for not choosing motherhood. What strategies does she use to undermine or discredit women's fears of undertaking the role of "mom"?
2. Quindlen says her reasons for choosing motherhood have nothing to do with self-sacrifice or doing the "Noble Thing." What are her reasons? In particular, what are her reasons for claiming that motherhood is actually superior to other work (see paragraphs 7 and 8)? What assumptions and values are these reasons based on?
3. How is Quindlen's experience with motherhood different from the "cage" she describes in paragraph 3? How does her style of writing help to persuade us that motherhood is fun?
4. What factors in Quindlen's life have enabled her to choose to stay home with her children? How realistic is this choice for most mothers? What factors have helped her to see this lifestyle as a choice rather than a trap?

For Inquiry and Convincing

A sociologist at the University of Illinois, Catherine E. Ross, studied 1,000 families in 1990 to research the effects of parenthood on psychological well-being. Ross found that the happiest women were those with no children and a job, while the most depressed were those who stayed home with their children. Do additional research into the question of whether women in general are happier working outside of the home or staying at home with their young children. Write an argument that uses such broadly based evidence to support or refute Quindlen's case for choosing to stay home.

For Inquiry and Persuasion

Quindlen suggests that women are "better" than men (paragraph 7), and that for this reason, many of them find child-rearing a rewarding experience. Inquire into the issue of whether men can be just as nurturing as women. (As the title of the movie *Mr. Mom* suggests, when men do take on the primary parenting role, are they taking on some sex-specific character traits?) Write a persuasive argument, aimed at men, that will make them willing to put their careers on the back burner while they stay home with their young children.

MY TURN

What's Wrong With Playing 'Like a Girl'?

When I realized my sons were learning sexism as they learned sports, I decided to take a stand

By DOROTHEA STILLMAN

I STARTED OUT WATCHING MY SONS' games and practices just to cheer the boys on, but I quickly learned another important reason to be there. I found that, as often as not, while the coaches showed the kids how to shoot a basket, throw a strike or head a soccer ball, they were also teaching them to regard girls as inferior to boys.

The coed basketball program was the worst offender. For three

weeks I watched as the coaches belittled the girls and humiliated the boys by saying they were "playing like girls." The 7-year-olds' division was about 30 percent girls. In the 10-year-olds' division there were no girls. Clearly, they were so discouraged by that age that they gave up.

One typical Saturday morning the gym rang with shouts as four groups of 7-year-olds excitedly waved their arms and urged their teammates to hurry. It was a relay dribbling race in my younger son's practice.

An all-girl team won against three other teams, all of which were made up exclusively or mostly of boys. As the last girl came to the finish, her teammates jumped up and exploded into cheers. A smirk came over the coach's face. He stood in the middle of the gym with a hand on one hip. "Are you going to let a bunch of girls beat you?" he roared at the boys.

The message was clear: if the girls won, it was because the boys hadn't been trying hard enough. The girls should feel no pride in their victory because it was a fluke. The natural order of things was that the boys should be superior to the girls—and be ashamed if they weren't.

The girls giggled uncertainly. The boys looked at each other sheepishly and

shrugged. The fathers, helping out on the floor, smiled. The mothers, sitting on the sidelines, showed no reaction.

But I was riled, and I wasn't going to take it. For three weeks the director of the program had been asking for a volunteer to coach the 10-year-olds, and no one had come forward. When he made the appeal again at the end of practice, I said I'd do it. He looked shocked, but he could hardly



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say no. The alternative was to cut 10 kids from the program, and he knew it.

But it wasn't going to be that simple. No sooner had I picked up the assignment than men swooped in to take it away from me. A big man standing nearby pushed his way between me and the program director. "Ron can run the practices," he said. "He just can't be there for the games on Saturdays because he has to work." Ron joined in: "You could be there for the games, and sometimes I'll be able to coach them, too, if I rearrange my lunch hour."

I went home and seethed. Ron would have been a fine coach if he had seen in

to volunteer on his own. But he hadn't. Ron never would have tried to use a man the way he was proposing to use me, and I was not willing to be used. I pulled myself together, called Ron and told him thanks but no thanks. If I was going to be the coach, I wanted to run the practices myself.

Then I got busy. I knew next to nothing about basketball (neither did most of the fathers who were coaching), but I gave myself a crash course. I read books. I attended every game the local high-school team played. I watched the game on TV every day.

At first I could only recognize the obvious: the fast break, the slam-dunk. But before long I noticed the finer points—the fake, the curl, the pick-and-roll. At home my kids and I talked basketball day and night. I researched and learned and developed drills and plays. I was so enthusiastic I even allowed my sons to dribble basketballs in the living room.

Before each of our games, the referees would ask the coaches for a roster of the players. My assistant was a man, and they approached him first every time.

"That's the coach over there," he would say, pointing to me. The refs would turn and scan the gym for another man. When they realized I was the one they were looking for, their eyebrows would shoot up. Or they'd break into a grin. Or their faces would freeze.

Out on the court the boys would be warming up. "Watch this, Coach," they'd call to me, eager to show off their fanciest moves, taking three-point shots or dribbling between their legs. "You guys are looking good." I'd say, "and they would beam with pride. To them I was no different from any other coach."

When I watched my young son's practices, I chatted with the other mothers. My coaching had sent a ripple through them. One woman asked, "Is someone helping you? How can you do it?" She seemed to think women were incapable of understanding basketball. Another was more supportive: "It's about time we had a woman coach," she said. "Best of all, a third woman joined the men out on the floor and helped run the last practice."

The season was ending, but something big was starting.

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KAY EBELING

The Failure of Feminism

Like many young women in the early 1970s, Kay Ebeling embraced the feminist movement. Writing in 1990, she uses the ensuing events of her life as evidence that feminism "backfired" on women, leaving them to struggle alone with work and children while men enjoyed a new freedom from family responsibilities. As you read Ebeling's essay, note what reasons she offers from her personal experiences to support her criticism of feminism. The editor's note in Newsweek, where this originally appeared as a "My Turn" column, described the author as a freelance writer and single mother of a two-year-old daughter.

THE OTHER day I had the world's fastest blind date. A Yuppie from Eureka penciled me in for 50 minutes on a Friday and met me at a watering hole in the rural northern California town of Arcata. He breezed in, threw his jammed daily planner on the table, and shot questions at me, watching my reactions as if it were a job interview. He eyed how much I drank. Then he breezed out to his next appointment. He had given us 50 minutes to size each other up and see if there was any chance for romance. His exit was so fast that as we left he let the door slam back in my face. It was an interesting slam.

Most of our 50-minute conversation had covered the changing state of male-female relationships. My blind date was 40 years old, from the Experimental Generation. He is "actively pursuing new ways for men and women to interact now that old traditions no longer exist." That's a real quote. He really did say that, when I asked him what he liked to do. This was a man who'd read *Ms.* magazine and believed every word of it. He'd been single for 16 years but had lived with a few women during that time. He was off that evening for a ski weekend, meeting someone who was paying her own way for the trip.

I too am from the Experimental Generation, but I couldn't even pay for my own drink. To me, feminism has backfired against women. In 1973 I left what could have been a perfectly good marriage, taking with me a child in diapers, a 10-year-old Plymouth, and Volume 1, Number One of *Ms.* magazine. I was convinced I could make it on my own. In the last 15 years my ex has married or lived with a succession of women. As he gets older, his women stay in their 20s. Meanwhile, I've stayed unattached. He drives a BMW. I ride buses.

Today I see feminism as the Great Experiment That Failed, and women in my generation, its perpetrators, are the casualties. Many of us, myself included, are saddled with raising children alone. The resulting poverty makes us experts at cornmeal recipes and ways to find free recreation on weekends. At the same time, single men from our generation amass fortunes in CDs and real-estate ventures so they can breeze off on ski weekends. Feminism freed men, not women. Now men are . . . ed the nuisance of a wife and family to support. After childbirth, if

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his wife's waist doesn't return to 20 inches, the husband can go out and get a more petite woman. It's far more difficult for the wife, now tied down with a baby, to find a new man. My blind date that Friday waved goodbye as he drove off in his RV. I walked home and paid the sitter with laundry quarters.

The main message of feminism was: Woman, you don't need a man. Remember, those of you around 40, the phrase: "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle?" That joke circulated through "consciousness raising" groups across the country in the '70s. It was a philosophy that made divorce and cohabitation casual and routine. Feminism made women disposable. So today a lot of females are around 40 and single with a couple of kids to raise on their own. Child-support payments might pay for a few pairs of shoes, but in general, feminism gave men all the financial and personal advantages over women.

What's worse, we asked for it. Many women decided: You don't need a family structure to raise your children. We packed them off to day-care centers where they could get their nurturing from professionals. Then we put on our suits and ties, packed our briefcases, and took off on this Great Experiment, convinced that there was no difference between ourselves and the guys in the other offices.

Biological thing. How wrong we were. Because like it or not, women have babies. It's this biological thing that's just there, these organs we're born with. The truth is, a woman can't live the true feminist life unless she denies her child-bearing biology. She has to live on the pill, or have her tubes tied at an early age. Then she can keep up with the guys with an uninterrupted career and then, when she's 30, she'll be paying her own way on ski weekends too.

The reality of feminism is a lot of frenzied and overworked women dropping kids off at day-care centers. If the child is sick, they just send along some children's Tylenol and then rush off to underpaid jobs that they don't even like. Two of my working-mother friends told me they were mopping floors and folding laundry after midnight last week. They live on five hours of sleep, and it shows in their faces. And they've got husbands! I'm not advocating that women retrogress to the brainless housewives of the '50s who spent afternoons baking macaroni sculptures and keeping Betty Crocker files. Post-World War II women were the first to be left with a lot of free time, and they weren't too creative in filling it. Perhaps feminism was a reaction to that Brainless Betty, and in that respect, feminism has served a purpose.

Women should get educations so they can be brainy in the way they raise their children. Women can start small businesses, do consulting, write freelance out of the home. But women don't belong in 12-hour-a-day executive office positions, and I can't figure out today what ever made us think we would want to be there in the first place. As long as that biology is there, women can't compete equally with men. A ratio cannot be made using disproportionate parts. Women and men are not equal, we're different. The economy might even improve if women came home, opening up jobs for unemployed men, who could then support a wife and children, the way it was, pre-feminism.

Sometimes on Saturday nights I'll get dressed up and go out club-hopping or to the theater, but the sight of all those other women my age, dressed a little too young, made up to hide encroaching wrinkles, looking hopefully into the crowds, usually depresses me. I end up coming home, to spend my Saturday night with my daughter asleep in her room nearby. At least the NBC Saturday-night lineup is geared demographically to women at home alone.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you believe that Ebeling's autobiographical account is sufficient to support her claim that feminism has failed to meet its intended goals? If you find her argument convincing, be able to say why. If you do not, say what you would need to know more about—either about her own life or from library or field research.
2. Ebeling's argument appeared originally as a "My Turn" column in *Newsweek*; within that general readership, what specific audience do you think Ebeling was writing to? Was it possibly other women of her generation with similar experiences who nevertheless still have faith in feminism? Or young women who may yet avoid the mistakes she made? Or some other group? Be able to explain the basis for your inference about Ebeling's intended audience.
3. The persuasive appeal of an autobiographical argument depends upon the ability of the writer to build identification and empathy between himself or herself and the audience. How effective is Ebeling at using the ethical and emotional appeals of persuasion?
4. In paragraphs 7 and 9, Ebeling points out that women's biological capacity for child-bearing makes them both different from and "not equal" to men. Do you agree that child-bearing necessarily makes women unable to compete equally in the workplace? Explain.

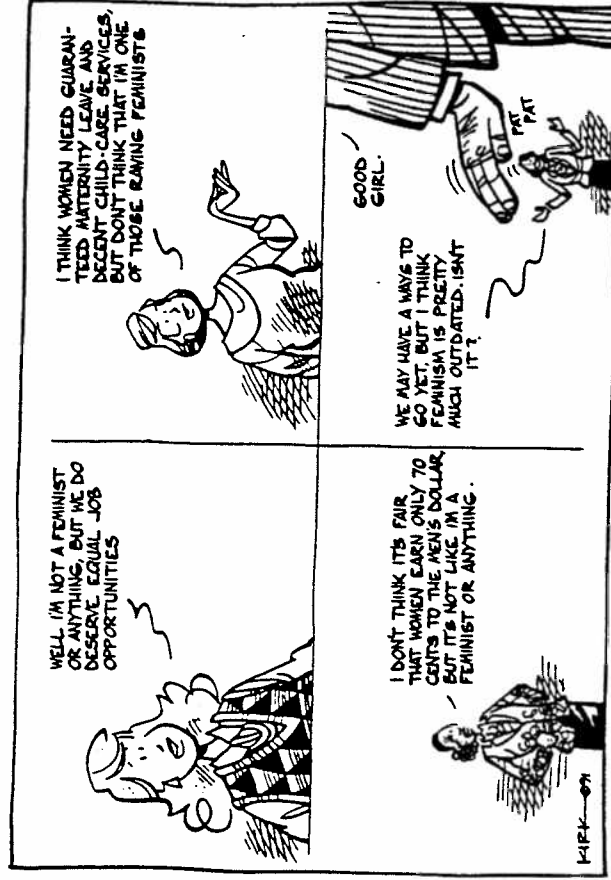
For Persuasion

Perhaps you have felt personal dissatisfaction over something, as Ebeling has about feminism. Your dissatisfaction may have been over a policy, a social institution, or even a belief or value that has affected your life. Write an argument in which you use your personal experiences to persuade an audience to see the validity of your objections. Try to organize your experience as reasons in support of your position rather than simply presenting a narrative of your experience. Also, try not to sound as if you are merely venting your anger or pleading for sympathy.

KIRK ANDERSON

Cartoon

The following cartoon appeared in *Ms. magazine* in 1993. How common are the attitudes expressed by these characters among your friends and acquaintances?



THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING WOMAN

Questions for Discussion

What is the point of the cartoon's title? What definition of "feminism" is being expressed? Evaluate the effectiveness of the cartoon as persuasion.

T'S A . . . Disappointment!

You wanted a boy and got a girl. You wanted a girl and got a boy. Other parents who've been there have some surprising insights to share.

I admit it. I would have liked a daughter. Not someone who would play with dolls (because I never had), but someone who would bring all her stuffed animals to a tea party. Someone whose hair I could comb, and whose hair I would let flow long and loose (because I never had). And—even though I'd been the organizing member of the "Tomboy Tree Club"—someone whom I could dress in all those gorgeous, lacy, frilly clothes. Pink ones.

What I have instead are two wonderful sons. We all have an idea of how we want our family to be. We want that son to carry on the family name. We want that daughter to be our best friend when she grows up. We want that boy or girl because we've got the other and the "perfect family" has "one of each."

Despite the fact that just about everyone has feelings about that they'd like to have, talking openly about our hopes—and our disappointments—remains largely taboo. Part of the reason is that it's a luxury to think about gender at all. With so many couples struggling with infertility, or trying to cope after a wrenching loss or serious illness, how dare we admit that we're disappointed with a perfectly healthy baby? But parents who are willing to talk about their feelings—and how they worked through them—help the rest of us discover an interesting truth about gender preferences: they evaporate most instantly when that child is born.

Child of Her Heart

Plum's mother of three Gail Milstein dreamed of a girl. When her first son was born, in large part because of her close relationship with her mother.

"When I had a second boy, to be honest, I was upset," she admits, "primarily because it flew in the face of my expectations. I wouldn't help thinking, 'Now it will be the boys and my husband. It'll be left out.'"

Compounding the disappointment, her close friend gave birth to a girl a few weeks later. "After talking to her, I hung up the phone and sobbed. I felt that what had happened to me had been a mistake."

In addition, she felt guilty and ungrateful for having negative feelings when she knew she had a beautiful, healthy child.

But something happened after second son Nate was born that surprised Milstein.

Her disappointment over not having produced a girl quickly turned to joy for the child she had. Over the course of the first year, Nate's personality emerged, and she began to marvel at the delightful child he was growing to be.

"Nate's different than the rest of us—very open, very easy, very affectionate," she says. "He completely captured my heart. I was missing the wrong attributes. Your relationships with your children are only in a small way about their gender; the important thing is who they are as people."

"The doctor said, 'It's a boy,'" Milstein continues. "What he would have said was, 'It's Nate. You have Nate.'"

In the end, Milstein did "get her girl." After receiving the amniocentesis results for her third child, she called back the office to ask, "Are you sure you didn't make a mistake?" It was an unexpected treat for me." Still, Milstein says that she was already at ease with whatever the results would be. "Who our children are is about their soul," she says. "[And] that sort of unfolds."

Our of a Kind: Boys

Milstein's experience can also be viewed as a lesson in sex-role stereotyping. The qualities that are often attributed to girls, easygoing temperament, cooperative nature, as compared to the aggressive, rough-and-tumble nature of boys, are just those, stereotypes.

Betsy Hedding, the mother of four boys, says that having four of the same sex has taught her that lesson well. While she believes there are inherent differences between the sexes, having so many of one gender allows her to see "how much variety there [actually] is."

Hedding, whose boys range in age from eight to fifteen, and who works at a junior high school, clearly loves kids, and loves to have her house full of them. As the boys enter adolescence, their household is becoming distinctly testosterone-heavy; she describes the mounds of sweat-drenched soccer clothes, the constantly emptying refrigerator, the male voices of her sons and their friends. "We even have a boy puppy," she notes with a laugh.

Hedding admits that she would have loved to have had a girl; she, too, enjoys a close relationship with her mother and sisters. "I had an ultrasound [with] my fourth and they said, 'We think it's a boy.' I cried. But it gave me enough time to resolve it."

Hedding does find opportunities to hang out with girls, from spending time with her nieces to serving as a confirmation guide for girls at her church.

"You are given what you're meant to have," she says. "Now, I can't imagine not having four sons. It's a novelty, but I can't imagine it otherwise."

Triple Play: Girls

Sometimes gender runs so strongly in an extended family that it becomes a running joke. As Lisa Heimer explains, "On both sides of our family, all the grandchildren have been girls—a total of ten." There's even a great-grandchild—who's female.

"Whenever any of [my siblings or Greg's siblings] gets pregnant, we say, 'It's a girl,'" Lisa says with a laugh.

"The theory was, from the way Lisa was carrying them and from the ultrasounds, the first two should have been boys," recalls Greg. "When I heard 'It's a girl,' it was kind of a shock."

Greg always wanted a son, and very much wanted a boy the second time. Instead, they got Robyn (to follow Samantha). By the time Kristina, their third daughter, came along, he'd changed his mind. "We would have had to do boy's and girl's soccer," he jokes. "And there is a comfort level that one achieves with one sex."

The Heimers also deny any sex-role stereotyping. Band and sports currently have the family on the go from morning to night. Greg takes the girls camping and fishing. And, as for male role models, Lisa notes that they have lots of male friends and relatives, including a godfather who attends the girls' soccer games.

How does Greg feel now about being the father of three girls? "I love it, wouldn't change it," he affirms. "As long as you are involved in their lives, give them support, help them with direction and questions, it doesn't make a difference."

Cultural Differences

Certified Nurse Midwife Amy Lange, who works at Planned Parenthood and previously delivered babies for twelve years, never recalls seeing parents not bond to their new baby. Still, she says that women express strong preferences about the sex of their children—and that these preferences can be culturally determined.

While her observations are entirely anecdotal, Lange says that many of her U.S.-born white patients tend to want their first babies to be girls. "Maybe it's because we 'know ourselves.' Maybe because we grow up playing dollies. When women are pregnant, they think about their mothers. I've seen women [who've said they wanted] only two kids and being on number four wanting that girl. I've had patients in tears with their third or fourth boy," she continues. "They're not grieving the child they've had. They're grieving the baby they've always imagined they'd have. It's the loss of a dream. Women identify girls with themselves," she concludes. "Women look into their baby girl's eyes and think, 'This is me.'"

Lange adds that gender preference tends to be the opposite among immigrant women, especially those who have recently arrived in the United States from countries where women are devalued. "One Vietnamese woman I was very attached to really wanted a boy because she had suffered so much as a girl."

Should We or Shouldn't We?

Over the years, a funny thing happened to me. I no longer wanted a daughter.

Perhaps, as the kids grew older, memories of my own, female adolescence began coming back to haunt me in all-too-vivid detail.



a source of embarrassment at playground discussions of sibling rivalry. It certainly wasn't that I had a ready source of hand-me-downs, since my boys were so different in body type (and general appearance, and temperament, and...you get the idea). It's just that we decided to stop at two. But not before I had asked myself, "How would it feel to know that I was carrying another boy?" And the answer came back quickly and clearly.

That would have been just fine with me.

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How Reliable—And Wise—Are the New Sex-Selection Techniques?

Used to be, back in the good old days, we'd wait with bated breath to find out the sex of our baby. We'd look for signs: Carrying high? Carrying out front? Strange cravings? Today techniques ranging from the pretty good (ultrasound) to the certain (amniocentesis) make answering that question nearly moot. Of course, these procedures were not developed for the purpose of sex-identification. But they are widely enough used to make one of the most frequently asked questions for expectant couples not "Do you know what you're having?" but "What are you having?"

Sometimes the knowledge medicine offers causes more problems than it solves.

Melissa, who asked that her real name not be used, discovered through amniocentesis that she was going to have a second son. She was dreaming for a daughter, and the news was nothing short of heartbreaking. Then her son was born and she was overwhelmed by love for her new child. Now, years later, she says the modern technology was a "disservice" that led her to spend months ruminating over something that, in the end, was unimportant. Had she waited to discover her son's sex at the moment of his birth, she says she would have been presented with the news and a real baby at the same time, a baby precious and needing her love and care.

People have always sought ways to choose the sex of their children; not surprisingly, a vast array of folk remedies have been developed. In recent years, Dr. Landrum Shettles has popularized his techniques in the United States in his book *How to Choose the Sex of Your Baby*. These low-cost,

low-tech methods involve timing intercourse based on the woman's ovulation, sexual positions, and other factors.

Other techniques are more expensive and invasive. Dr. Ronald J. Ericsson offers an artificial insemination technique costing up to \$1,100 and claiming, according to a recent *New York Times Magazine* story ("Getting the Girl," by Lisa Belkin, July 25, 1999), a success rate as high as eighty percent.

The latest option on the scene is Microsort, detailed in the *New York Times Magazine* article, which suggests that the procedure represents a breakthrough in sex-selection technology. The process involves taking the man's sperm and using a flow cytometer, fluorescent dye, and an ultraviolet laser—sorting it into X (female) and Y (male). The woman is then impregnated using artificial insemination. It's not cheap; it costs \$2,500 per try, with the average pregnancy requiring three tries.

Jon Pryor, M.D., associate professor at the University of Minnesota and director of the Center for Men's Health and Infertility, agrees that Microsort is something different. In contrast to previous methods that have not worked remarkably well in general, he says: "I'm pretty convinced this one works."

His concern, however, is that the long-term safety of the dye used in the technique has not been tested in humans; it may have effects we won't know about until these children reach adulthood.

While Pryor is uncomfortable with the idea of using technology and resources for sex selection,

perhaps because he witnesses the suffering of infertile couples who can't have either one—he acknowledges that people do have strong emotions about gender.

Jeffrey Kahn, Ph.D., M.P.H., the director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Bioethics, takes less issue with the idea of gender preferences. "Wanting one sex over the other is not inherently an evil desire," says Kahn. "People have always had children for other than altruistic reasons, for instance, to help out on the farm or to continue their legacy or—in spite of the jokes—for tax deductions."

Neither is he terribly concerned about where Microsort sits on the slippery slope of potential misuse; sorting sperm is not a refined technique and can't be used to select for other traits.

Kahn points out, however, that sophisticated technology already exists that ensures 100-percent guaranteed sex-selection—plus selection for any other traits we can genetically identify. He thinks that's where the ethical debate really lies.

The technology, called pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), involves taking an eight-celled embryo created in vitro, explains Kahn. "After genetic testing, the embryos lacking disease and/or carrying the desired trait(s) are placed in a woman's uterus, hopefully for implantation and gestation." While invasive and expensive, it's becoming more readily available.

With PGD, Kahn says, "we can potentially select for IQ or sexual preferences or risk of mental illness or to repair or enhance [certain qualities]. We are talking about technol-

ogy with much more potential for abuse."

Still, he is optimistic that with so much new technology on the horizon, we as a society are pushing ourselves to talk about ethical, legal, and moral issues in advance. "You can always identify potential misuses of new technology, medical or otherwise," he says. "The trick is to help draw distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable uses."

As for sex selection itself, ethicists have voiced concerns about its use in parts of the world where girls are considered undesirable. That doesn't seem to be an issue in the United States, however, if the Microsort data are any indication. According to the *Times* article, 83 of the first 111 Microsort attempts were for girls. Still, many women are uncomfortable with the idea. While Betsy Hedding, the mother of four boys, admits to having tried a few "low-tech" methods to conceive a girl, she doubts she would have ever used a procedure like Microsort. "I don't know if I would go to that length, in part because of my faith. It's tinkering with something that maybe we weren't meant to tinker with. God has a plan for my life. I was given the opportunity and privilege of raising fine young men who will be good fathers and husbands."

Besides, as Gail Milstein, the mother of two sons and a daughter says, "We're so sure we know what we want and we're so sure we know what we need. Sometimes you don't get what you want. But really, it's better."

Deborah Sugarman is the happy mother of two sons, ages 15 and 12.