



Protective Instincts

A boy or a girl? Suppose you could have just one, which would you choose? Spellbound as I was by political correctness, my hunch tended toward robust public support for “It doesn’t matter, as long as it is healthy.”

Not so, according to a late 2000 Gallup poll, which found it matters very much indeed. Forty-two percent of Americans said if they could only have one child, they’d like a boy, 27% a girl. Only a quarter said it didn’t matter, they’d take either.

In large part, men are to blame for this disparity. By an enormous 37-point margin, men would prefer a boy (55%) to a girl (18%). Women’s preferences are more evenly divided—35% prefer girls, 32% boys.

So why the preference gap among men? Socialization and genealogy are two likely contributing factors. As Tim Allen taught us on ABC’s *Home Improvement*, a man thinks his life just isn’t complete until he teaches a son the paternal order—mounting a pegboard, small engine repair, accurate compound miter cuts. Then there’s the proverbial family tree—a man’s traditional responsibility to extend the family name to the next generation.

Beyond this, men prefer boys for another, more utilitarian reason—a belief that it is simply easier to raise boys. Two-thirds of the men (64%) interviewed in the 2000 Gallup poll believe boys are easier to raise than girls are. Only one-quarter thinks it is the other way around. Participating in the rearing process doesn’t affect this notion. Sixty-one percent of fathers say boys are easier; only 26% say girls.

Maybe dear old Dad knows best. But why do we fathers see bringing up girls as more challenging? Perhaps, in part, it is because we regard them differently than we do boys, no matter how often we tell ourselves that they are equal in our eyes. Consider this oft-played scene:

Dad’s sitting inside on a hot July evening and catches a glimpse of his teenage son stealing a kiss from his girl on the front porch. Smiling, Dad thinks, “Attaboy,” and returns to his business. Reverse the roles: now it is Dad’s daughter out there kissing her boyfriend. If Dad’s not chasing the boy up the driveway, he’s probably flicking the outside light on and off.

No doubt, we hold girls to a different standard than boys, one that some might condemn as overtly sexist. But many fathers might prefer to think of it as a well-intended protective reflex.

It is plausible this protective response is pent-up consternation over the potential sexual encounters that await our daughters. Possibly, we’re remembering our own youthful impulses and are chagrined to imagine our little girls as the objects of such intentions.

That same anxiety is much less apparent with sons. Consider a 1997 Public Opinion Strategies survey, in which men were three times as likely to say they’d be upset finding a condom in their 14-year-old daughter’s pocket than in their son’s. In a survey done for Lifetime television in 1991, the public was three times more worried about teenage girls having sex (28%) than teenage boys (9%).

Other polling data find higher levels of support for daughters abstaining from sex until marriage, compared to sons. For instance, 42% in a Lifetime survey thought it very important for a daughter to remain a virgin until marriage, while 24% said the same was true for a son.

While patently unfair, this protective response may not be entirely without good reason. Most daughters are physically more vulnerable than most sons. They may get pregnant, and are far more likely to fall victim to sexual harassment or date rape than sons are. Whatever the likelihood of such events befalling any particular daughter, in this instance perception and possibility may trump reality in a worried father’s mind.

At some point in their adolescence, daughters will likely interpret this double standard as unjust and smacking of distrust. How could it be more acceptable for a boy to carry a condom or have sex before marriage than for a girl? And whose daughters, they might justifiably ask, will all those sons lose their virginity to if not to ours? This sounds like the right mix for a strained relationship, punctuated by father-daughter conversations about a uniquely uncomfortable subject, especially during the already contentious teen years.

Aside from our desire to pass on our surnames and our manly secrets, perhaps it’s our dread of such future awkwardness, envisioned through the sexuality-focused lens with which we differently regard our daughters and our sons, that causes us to hope more for blue nurseries than for pink ones. ●

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