

## Girls vs Boys

# Gender Selection and Infant Adoption

The staff at Pact has always struggled with the question of whether it is ethical to participate in infant placements where pre-adoptive parents are open to adopting a baby of only one gender and not the other. We are looking for families who are ready to experience unbridled joy as they welcome a child into their lives. All children deserve unmitigated commitment and love. As a child welfare organization, Pact must put *children's needs first*. When prospective adoptive parents indicate that they are only interested in adopting a specific gender, some questions and concerns arise.

*Is fulfilling parents' goals for their family something with which we should burden adopted children?*

Some families who have already have a child of one gender come to adoption thinking that it makes sense to adopt a child of a gender they don't already have, or have always dreamed or envisioned parenting. In other words, the child they hope to adopt will provide a missing piece for *them*. Family gender balance is not a *child welfare* issue, but rather appears to us to be a *parent welfare* issue. Of course every adult brings some self-focused need to the relationship of parent-child, but hoping for a gender or any other particular characteristic in a child is one thing (all parents entertain some dreams about their child-to-be); our concern is that insisting on it could create a sense of disappointment or place a burden of expectation on the child.

*Expectant parents looking for unconditional love for a child they are considering placing for adoption want and need to know that the adoptive parents they choose are absolutely committed to their child – as if that child were being born to them.* Often pregnant women who are planning to place a child for adoption don't know the gender of the baby they are carrying. Medical professionals do not (and should not) do medical procedures for the convenience of others who are not their patients. When pre-adoptive parents will only adopt a child of one gender, they are treating an adopted child differently than a child to whom they had given birth.

We have had families suggest that expectant parents choose two families, one each who could be available depending on the gender of the child at the birth. But children are not interchangeable parts in a family puzzle. Expectant mothers making an adoption plan before they deliver are hoping for parents who will feel unqualified love and concern for their child, beginning before that child is even born.

*Is gender selection a way of making up for past losses that may have resulted from infertility or other failed attempts to bring children into the family?* Part of our job at Pact is to make sure that every couple or individual has moved to a place where they feel just as much joy at the prospect of welcoming their adopted child as they did when they were contemplating welcoming a child born to them. Every child deserves that, boy or girl. Parents' losses and pain have nothing to do with a coming child and as such, it is critical that pre-adoptive parents are SURE that they are not putting any past angst or frustration onto the children they hope to adopt. Adoptees already have their own issues of loss; as adoptive parents we have to make sure not to add our own onto their pile.

*Is gender selection based on gender stereotypes?*

Parenting can bring out our own unexamined biases in surprising ways, based on our desire to fulfill our own deep-seated longings. Many of us hold expectations about what it will be like to parent a girl or boy based on our own positive or negative life experiences. These unconscious fantasies can unwittingly place pressure on our children, particularly if they don't live up to our dreams. What if the girl with whom you have dreamed of sharing your doll collection turns out to have a passion for video games and skateboarding? Again, it is never a child's job to complete an adult's fantasy. We ask parents to consider if they are placing expectations on girls and boys that are limited to stereotypes. If family creation is based on such typecasting, there is a risk of placing limitations on the way children can envision their personal possibilities.

*Does racial bias “color” the preference for a girl or a boy?* Because Pact’s placement work is exclusively focused on children of color, this is a particularly important issue to us. In adoption in general, more pre-adopters want to adopt girls, and this bias is particularly strong in relation to African American and Latino children. Professionals have conjectured that this may reflect an assumption that girls of color are “easier,” and boys are more likely to get into trouble or be troubled. These stereotypes, particularly as they apply to boys of color, are of grave concern for us at Pact. We believe that parents of children of color must recognize and resist racism every day. It is true that boys of color face special challenges in society, and they deserve dedicated parents who are willing to nurture and stand up for them. If a parent says to us, “I know my limits, I don’t feel capable of parenting an African American boy,” we have to ask ourselves—what assumptions and perceptions might this parent then pass on to their African American daughter about the males in her community?

*When giving birth, the unpredictability of a child’s gender is generally accepted as part of parenting. Should adoption be different?* It makes sense that pre-adopters think that because adoption is different than giving birth the choices they get to make are different as well. We actually encourage this; asking parents to assess their personal tool kits regarding their ability to parent children with different characteristics. Ultimately, however, gender selection seems dangerously close to “baby shopping,” a consumer approach to adoption that is too often encouraged by professionals and agencies who encourage a marketplace mentality when advertising to pre-adopters.

Sometimes pre-adopters who are hoping for one specific gender tell us that these questions make them feel judged. We don’t have any right to judge—in fact I hold ourselves at Pact and other adoption professionals responsible for educating parents and asking them to consider ALL matters of choice in the context of a child-focused approach. Children are more valuable than can possibly be expressed; we must work to ensure that they are treated as the precious beings they are. In my experience, most adoptive parents are eager to live up to the amazing privilege of parenting them.