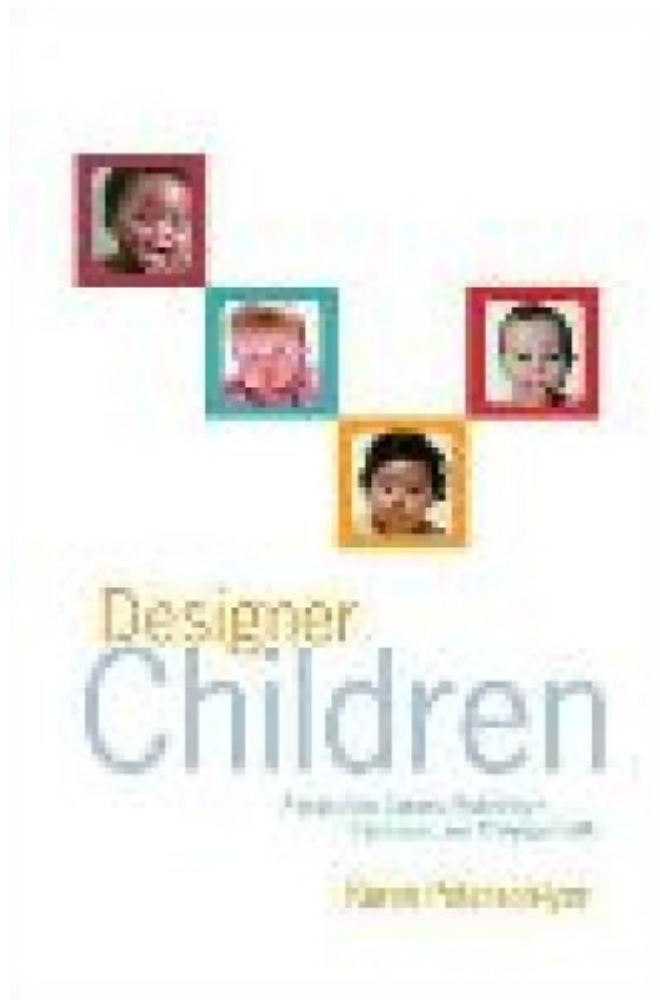


Designer Children

reviewed by [Rebekah Miles](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Designer Children: Reconciling Genetic Technology, Feminism, and Christian Faith

Karen Peterson-Iyer
Pilgrim

Philosophers Mary Midgley and Judith Hughes have observed: “Individualism, like salt, is a very good and necessary thing. . . . But how about a diet of salt alone? . . . Unmitigated individualism is a death wish.”

Karen Peterson-Iyer also challenges those who rely too heavily on liberal individualism and “the right to choose” as they make decisions about genetic manipulation for children. When people make decisions about the genetic manipulation of their children (or potential children), they would do well to see procreative liberty as one part of a larger concern for human well-being.

Peterson-Iyer, an ethicist and a candidate for ordination in the Presbyterian Church, offers not only a persuasive argument about liberalism and human well-being, but also a fascinating overview of genetic science and genetic manipulation, including the decisions many parents face today and the more complex decisions parents may face in the future as technologies improve. The most compelling part of the book is the author’s reflection on the effect of genetic manipulation on the relationship between parent and child.

Many parents are already highly invested in “perfecting” their children by providing them with fine schools, the best piano lessons and multiple opportunities for athletic performance. This desire for “high-quality” children can undermine not only the child’s development but also the parent-child relationship and the basic notion of unconditional parental love and acceptance.

This perfectionist bent in our culture (along with the tendency to commodify just about everything, including children) shapes choices about genetic manipulation. Peterson-Iyer writes, “As reproductive technologies have become increasingly sophisticated at predicting genetic and chromosomal abnormalities prenatally, the proclivity to demand high achievement from children has broadened to include a tendency to expect more ‘perfect’ babies even from birth. . . . Techniques of genetic manipulation can only exacerbate these trends.”

Given these perfectionistic attitudes about children, the prospect of genetic manipulation can be threatening to people who believe that a child is a gift from God, not a product controlled by adults, and that the vocation of parenting centers around the unconditional love and acceptance of children as they are. Peterson-Iyer summarizes Stanley Hauerwas’s position: “Our task is not to seek a high degree of control over . . . the ‘quality’ of our children. Rather Christians should view children

as an occasion to love those whom we do not necessarily ‘choose’ to love, to ‘love them for what they are rather than what we want or wish them to be.’”

While recognizing the importance of accepting and loving children as they are, Peterson-Iyer also points out that love of children sometimes rightfully leads us to take action to protect them from unnecessary suffering. In some cases, genetic manipulation is not about “molding or ‘making’ children” but is simply “a form of helping, even loving them.” Of course, “helping children who suffer can hardly be classified as harmful; part of the central mission of Jesus himself was to heal the sick.” Our desire to have healthier children springs, then, not only from the consumer-driven, perfectionistic bent of our culture, but also from the deepest desires and impulses of good parents and others who love children and from the gospel mandate to love and care for our neighbor.

Peterson-Iyer’s desire to choose the things that might help her children and protect them from unnecessary suffering is echoed in the desires of parents around the world and across the ages. We desire to give children a better life not only because we are perfectionistic, consumerist sinners (which we are), but also because, by virtue of our created nature and the call of our faith, we love children and want to help them. Because of this fundamental hope and love, we look toward new possibilities, but because of our fundamental sin and tendency toward distortion, we remain cautious. Throughout this book, Peterson-Iyer tries to balance the hope and healing possibilities of genetic manipulation with a cautious assessment of human sin and the potential dangers of this new technology.

Peterson-Iyer quotes geneticist James Watson: “We used to think our fate is in our stars. Now we know, in large measure, our fate is in our genes.” She reminds us that our fate is also in our own hands, in the choices we make—choices about well-being, about particular genetic techniques, and even about the appropriate reach and limits of reproductive choice.

We also remember that ultimately our faith is not in the stars or our genes or our human hands but in the hands of God, who loves us in all of our imperfection and through all of our suffering.