

Using ethical frameworks

Introduction

Students are given a statement about pre-natal screening and a set of ethical arguments that challenge or support the statement. They are asked to decide which ethical framework is being used in each argument.

Resources

Scissors, glue and plain white paper.

Acknowledgement

This activity is adapted with permission from Ethical Emporium University of York Science Education Group.

The activity

Cut up the table Figure 1 into the eight separate arguments. Ask students, working in pairs, to sort these into four piles depending on which of the four ethical frameworks best fits each one. Some will be more straightforward than others.

Then ask them to come up with one more argument related to the original statement within each framework.

Leave time for whole-group feedback and comments at the end.

Suggested answers

to the sorting activity with one additional argument for each framework.

Rights and duties

Every individual, born or unborn, has the right to life.

Rights of a fetus may conflict with rights of the mother if a pregnancy presents risks to the mother's physical or mental health.

Parents, medical professionals and society have a duty of care towards an individual before and after birth.

Maximising the amount of good in the world

It is unethical to bring a child with a genetic disease into the world if this will result in suffering of the individual, reduce the happiness of parents and family, or drain the financial resources of society.

In a society where the number of children born to most parents is limited by the use of contraception, allowing a child with a genetic disease to be born in effect replaces a healthy child with an unhealthy one. Selecting healthy children will strengthen, rather than weaken, the gene pool, reducing the number of faulty genes in the population.

People with severe physical or mental disabilities are often able and active citizens, contributing greatly to society. Judging an individual's 'fitness to live' on the basis of genetic disorders may deny society the benefits of these people's contributions.

Making decisions for yourself

Parents may have to make a special commitment of care to a child with a disability. It is up to the parents to decide if they are willing and able to do this.

Medical professionals need to take time and care to explain the full implications of a positive result in pre-natal genetic screening. Unless parents understand the range of potential scenarios, positive and negative, they are not in the position validly to take the necessary decisions.

Nurses and doctors who do not wish to participate in abortions should have their wishes respected.

Leading a virtuous life

A 'good' society is prepared to love and care for individuals irrespective of their physical or mental capacities.

Allowing pre-natal genetic screening to take place is only acceptable in a limited range of cases. These include cases where early detection of a disorder will improve the effectiveness of post-natal treatment and care.

Abortion could be seen as virtuous in cases where the genetic disorder produces a great deal of suffering and misery for the individual with the disorder.

Figure 1

<p>A Every individual, born or unborn, has the right to life.</p>	<p>B In a society where the number of children born to most parents is limited by the use of contraception, allowing a child with a genetic disease to be born in effect replaces a healthy child with an unhealthy one. Selecting healthy children will strengthen, rather than weaken, the gene pool, reducing the number of faulty genes in the population.</p>
<p>C Parents may have to make a special commitment of care to a child with a disability. It is up to the parents to decide if they are willing and able to do this.</p>	<p>D A 'good' society is prepared to love and care for individuals irrespective of their physical or mental capacities.</p>
<p>E It is unethical to bring a child with a genetic disease into the world if this will result in suffering of the individual, reduce the happiness of parents and family, or drain the financial resources of society.</p>	<p>F Rights of a fetus may conflict with rights of the mother if a pregnancy presents risks to the mother's physical or mental health.</p>
<p>G Allowing pre-natal genetic screening to take place is only acceptable in a limited range of cases. These include cases where early detection of a disorder will improve the effectiveness of post-natal treatment and care.</p>	<p>H Medical professionals need to take time and care to explain the full implications of a positive result in pre-natal genetic screening. Unless parents understand the range of potential scenarios, positive and negative, they are not in the position validly to take the necessary decisions.</p>

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The activity

Using ethical frameworks helps to construct valid ethical arguments.

1. Read the following statement about the ethics of prenatal genetic screening.

Prenatal genetic screening not only carries risk of miscarriage, it also leads to the possibility of abortion where the test result is positive. Most people would not consider murdering a child or adult with a genetic disorder such as Down's or cystic fibrosis – a newborn baby with either of these conditions is offered medical care and support to lead the fullest possible life. How can it be right to abort the same individual a few months previously, as a result of genetic screening?

2. You are provided with a range of ethical arguments challenging or supporting the statement above. Sort these arguments into four groups, depending on which of the four ethical frameworks described below best fits each one.

Four ethical frameworks

Rights and duties

Rights define what people can expect as their due, so far as it is under the control of people or human society. There is always a duty associated with a right, though in many cases the duty on other people is simply that they do not interfere with or prevent others claiming their rights. Any right an individual has relies on other people carrying out their duties towards that individual. So it follows that if people neglect their duties, then other people's rights may be neglected.

Maximising the amount of good in the world

This framework balances the benefits of an action against the risks and costs; it promotes the common good to help everyone have a fair share of the benefits in society, a community or a family. This framework is often described as 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'.

It could be seen as 'right' to override the rights of individuals in order to bring about happiness in the wider community.

Making decisions for yourself

This framework considers that people should make their own lives. Respecting people's autonomy (independence) and decision-making abilities enables individuals to make reasoned and informed choices. Personal autonomy is where people control their own destiny, through decisions they make throughout their lives.

Leading a virtuous life

This framework supports the moral 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of actions. An action can be described as right or wrong independently from any consequences of the action. It is not the consequences that make an action right or wrong but the principle or motivation on which the action is based.

3. When you have finished the sorting, try to produce at least one *additional* argument within each of the four ethical frameworks, relating to the statement about the ethics of prenatal genetic screening.
4. Share your decisions and arguments with the rest of the class.