

“Do You Support Abortion in Cases of Fetal Deformity?”

Are some abortions merciful?

Stephen Wagner

Task #1: Show Compassion for the Parents and the Child

While deformity (also called “fetal anomaly”) presents an emotional challenge to the parents and family of the unborn (and to all of us), the moral question is actually very simple. If you don’t begin by acknowledging the very real discomfort the parents are feeling, however, why should anyone take your moral case seriously? First, try to empathize and show concern for parents’ emotional pain.

In addition to the lost hopes and frustration of the “American ideal” (healthy children and uncomplicated births), parents understandably want to save their children from the difficult life a deformity can cause. No one wants his child to suffer humiliation or the inability to gain independence. So it’s critical that we recognize that children with deformities may suffer immensely.

Task #2: Tell Grace’s Story

Since the deformity concern is heavy with emotional appeal, start by telling the story of Grace, whose parents found out she had Trisomy 18 in the womb, refused to allow the doctors to abort, taught the medical staff how to deliver their baby, then held her as she slowly passed away over a two month period. The family reports the experience of caring for this child as one of their most cherished memories. See Grace’s story in the family’s own words: <http://chask.org/amazinggracetrisomy18.htm>. After telling the story, ask these questions:

- Isn’t it better to treat the unborn as a patient, since she is a human being?
- If a child has a fatal deformity, is dismemberment really the most humane treatment we can give? We give hospice care to the elderly when they are dying; can’t we give the same kind of care to the unborn whose death is imminent?
- Can’t we love both the parents who are suffering and the child who is dying?

To read more stories from parents of children with devastating and/or life-threatening disabilities, see www.BeNotAfraid.net. Children with many different disabilities and conditions are represented on the site.

Task #3: Refocus the Discussion on the Question, “What Is the Unborn?”

First, it is helpful to ask, “Do you know how many abortions take place because of deformities?” Then you can point out that only 3%-14% of abortions take place because of health problems in the fetus. (3% of women who have abortions claim their “most important reason” is a “Possible health problem affecting the fetus.” 14% say a possible fetal health problem affected their decision. See *Finer, et. al. “Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives,” Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 2005, 37(3):110–118* available at <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3711005.pdf>.)

Next, grant the severest case of deformity (since they do occur, and a child with such an affliction will almost surely be aborted); show how it doesn’t justify killing a terminally-ill two-year-old (trot out the really sick toddler). The abortion advocate will be forced to come to grips

with her view – she is recommending abortion as a solution to deformity because she doesn't believe the unborn is a human being:

Statement	Trot Out the Toddler Question	Embedded Moral Question
Shouldn't we have mercy on the child and save him from pain while we can?	<i>Is it merciful to kill a toddler to save her from pain?</i>	Is it right to kill someone because she is in pain?
Would you force parents to have a deformed child?	<i>Should we force parents to keep a deformed two-year-old? Should we let the parents kill her?</i>	Is it right to kill someone because she is deformed?

Does Future or Present Suffering Justify Killing?

I was speaking with a crowd on a college campus in 2004 when a male student named Patrick stepped up to the plate. I listened carefully as Patrick suggested an argument he was pondering. He said, "Even if the fetus suffers a bit in the abortion procedure, it doesn't suffer for long." I agreed that this was the case, at least with the most common first-trimester abortions. Patrick then made his case: "Isn't it better to kill the fetus now and cause it minimal pain than to allow it to live when we know in some cases it will be abused or have a miserable, painful childhood?" I agreed in order to establish common ground, but then turned the tables on Patrick: "I agree that many children will have miserable lives. But can't we be certain many two-year-olds in the inner city will also have miserable lives in the future? Can their mothers take them to the hospital to euthanize them painlessly in order to save them the future pain and sorrow? If we say it is merciful and right to kill someone to save them from future pain, wouldn't that justify any killing?" Patrick stepped back and was quiet. He said, with a remarkable honesty, "I hadn't thought about that." (This story was originally printed in Justice For All's [UNM Campus Report](#), April 2004)

Challenge: What If She Bites the Bullet and Says We Can Kill Deformed Toddlers Who Are Suffering?

When a person advocates for abortion to deal with deformity and you trot out a toddler, she has two choices. She can claim the unborn is not a human being like a toddler, so the "future" deformity of a person justifies aborting him now. Your response? Show the unborn is a human being so that the value we place on toddlers (we don't kill them for pain or deformity) will be placed on the unborn (deformity doesn't justify abortion).

But what if she agrees that the unborn *is* a human being and claims we still can kill him? What if she says we can kill a toddler who is deformed and suffering? The following suggestions should help.

Task #4: Build Common Ground Using Physical Deformities and Down Syndrome

Although it is more difficult for some people to see the value of human beings with severe deformities, my experience is that most people believe that most deformities (e.g. cleft palate, deafness, blindness, Down syndrome) are not good reasons to abort. Although many would not want to have a disabled child themselves (they might abort even if they believed it was wrong), they don't see it as a good reason when they are not involved. Use this to build common ground.

Ask this question: "So we agree that the unborn is a human being, but you believe some human beings can be killed for certain deformities, is that right? Do you think we should be able to kill Down syndrome toddlers? What about those with cerebral palsy and other physical

deformities?” Almost certainly, the response will be, “No. Because those children can lead relatively meaningful lives.” Your response? “So we agree that the best way to treat people with less severe deformities is to welcome them and support them and encourage them, right?”

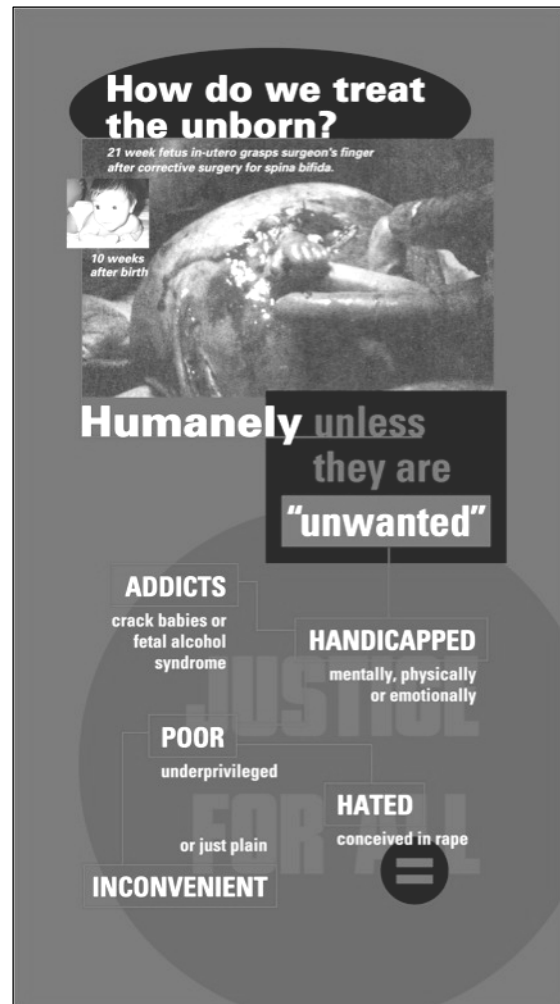
Reflect for a Moment...Is There a “Life Unworthy of Life”?

But what about the severest deformities, in either the physical or mental categories? Many in the general public, even if they are against most abortions will say, “It’s merciful to put a person out of his misery” or “We shouldn’t put a deformed person through such misery.” In essence, they are saying there *is* a *life unworthy of life*.

Life unworthy of life. This was precisely the phrase used by the Nazi doctors who mounted a killing campaign against the disabled. They began with the disabled, calling them *lebensunwertes Leben* (Ger. “*life unworthy of life*”), and of course, by the end of their killing campaign, included Jews, Gypsies, and others in the same category.

Side 1, Panel 3 of the Justice For All Exhibit (page 4 of the Exhibit Brochure) tells the story of Samuel Armas, a child who is famous for having his photograph taken before he was born. He was in his mother’s uterus, being operated on for spina bifida, when his hand popped out of the incision the surgeon had made in the uterine wall. The doctor placed his finger under Samuel’s tiny hand, as if to say “We’ve got your back covered, little guy.” A world-famous photograph was taken and Samuel later testified before a senate subcommittee.

Why is Samuel’s story interesting? Because many of the children diagnosed with spina bifida in utero don’t get the benefit of a \$35,000 surgery. They get a \$300 surgery – an abortion.⁶⁰ Why do we treat some of the disabled unborn children like patients and others like medical waste? There’s no difference in the children, so the only place the difference can be is in the parents. Some parents want their children, regardless of inconvenience or challenge. Others don’t want the inconvenience or challenge. Or perhaps they believe the unborn is only a potential child – a life unworthy of life. Whether for selfishness or ignorance of what the unborn is, that’s sad.



⁶⁰ I first heard the Samuel Armas story, and this particular way of connecting it to abortion, from David Lee, Executive Director at Justice For All.