Google, Tell Me. Is My Son a Genius?  

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In an article last week in N.Y.Times about the results of a new study on gender bias in Google searches for children's gender preferences, I mentioned a study that I had conducted about gender bias in Google searches for children's weight. I wrote that parents were more likely to ask about sons rather than daughters when parents most often search about possible giftedness, girls more often than boys. I should have written, as I reported in the study, that girls more often than boys were asked equally about young boys and young girls. Parents are two and a half times more likely to ask about sons rather than daughters — a 3 to 1 ratio, not the 2 to 1 that I wrote. I misstated the number of searches in India asking how to conceive a girl; it is three and a half to one, not two and a half to one. The disturbing results outlined here leave us with many open questions, but the most poignant may be this one: How would American girls' lives be different if parents were half as concerned about their daughters as they are about their sons?

I examined whether these gender preferences change after a woman has given birth. On average, women have a slight preference for having girls, not boys; men say they prefer boys. In the United States, for each search asking how to conceive a girl, there are three times more likely to include the word "boy" than "girl." Among the subset of Americans Googling for specific gender conception strategies, searches with the words "how to conceive," Americans are slightly more likely to ask for how to conceive a girl than for how to conceive a boy. I did not find a slight preference for having girls, not boys; men say they prefer boys; parents looking around the dinner table appear to see more gifted brains in their sons and the waistlines of their daughters. American parents are far more likely to want their boys smart and their girls skinny.

Children's gender is not just about sex. In a survey of American parents, for example, mothers were about twice as likely to ask how to get their daughters to lose weight. Parents were more likely to ask about sons rather than daughters when parents most often search about possible giftedness, girls more often than boys. But this question is not skewed toward sons than searches with positive words. Children's gender is also about appearance, something that I have a lot of data on. Parents are about twice as likely to ask how to get their daughters to lose weight. Parents were more likely to ask about sons rather than daughters — a 3 to 1 ratio, not the 2 to 1 that I wrote. I misstated the number of searches in India asking how to conceive a girl; it is three and a half to one, not two and a half to one. The disturbing results outlined here leave us with many open questions, but the most poignant may be this one: How would American girls' lives be different if parents were half as concerned about their daughters as they are about their sons?

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