

What finding out a child's sex before birth says about a mother

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Photo by Bianca de Blok.

An expectant mother who chooses to find out her child's sex before birth may be giving subtle clues about her views on proper gender roles, new research suggests.

The study found that women who choose not to learn their child's sex may be more open to new experiences, and combine egalitarian views about the roles of men and women in society with conscientiousness.

On the other hand, expectant mothers who scored high on a test of parenting perfectionism were more likely than others to learn their

baby's sex.

"These results suggest women who choose not to learn their baby's sex may not worry about having clothes, toys and colors for their child that match traditional gender expectations," said Letitia Kotila, lead author of the study and a graduate student in human sciences at The Ohio State University.

"We don't know this for sure yet, but expectant mothers' choice on whether to find out their baby's sex may show gender role attitudes that will shape how they raise their children."

Kotila conducted the study with Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, associate professor, and Claire Kamp Dush, assistant professor, both in human sciences at Ohio State.

The results appear online in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* and will be published in a future print edition.

The research involved 182 expectant mothers in Columbus who participated in a study designed to examine experiences and behaviors across the transition to parenthood. About two-thirds of the expectant mothers in this study knew their baby's sex before birth.

All of the participants took a variety of tests to measure various aspects of their personality, gender role beliefs and expectations related to parenting perfectionism.

Mothers who knew the sex of their child tended to be less educated, have lower household incomes and were less likely to be married than women who did not know.

The strongest effect was found in women who combined egalitarian

gender role beliefs (the belief that women and men should share parenting roles) with conscientiousness.

"These women have egalitarian beliefs, but also this personality trait of [conscientiousness](#) in which they stick to their beliefs and act on them," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

Participants with this combination of traits were 87 percent less likely than others to know their child's sex before birth.

"A conscientious, egalitarian expectant mother may want to wait to find out the sex of the baby because she doesn't want to create an environment that reinforces old gender stereotypes," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

Women who scored high in "openness to experience" – suggesting they were curious and independent—were also less inclined to learn their baby's sex.

"These [women](#) may be more willing to let their pregnancy unfold naturally and not feel the need for tests to reveal the child's sex," Kotila said.

Expectant mothers who scored high in parenting perfectionism – meaning they set unrealistically high standards – were slightly more likely to find out the sex early. More than other expectant mothers, they may think knowing the child's sex will relieve them of some anxiety during the uncertain pregnancy process, Kotila said.

Schoppe-Sullivan said this study is just a starting point for larger questions about the implications that knowing a child's [sex](#) may have for future parenting.

"If you know ahead of time that you're having a girl, are you layering on all the pink and purple in a way that is going to push an extremely feminine ideal on your [child](#)?" she said.

"This may affect what paths a girl thinks is appropriate, all the way to what kind of careers she considers."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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