

## DISCUSSION TRIGGERS

### THE STEM CELL DEBATE

Nobody Lives Forever Teachers Resource

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## Discussion Trigger 1

### Is it acceptable to use human embryos of up to 14 days for research into incurable diseases?

PHEE            That's a blastocyst.

TRACEY        A what?

PHEE            The beginnings of the Human Embryo. It's 5-6 days old.

TRACEY        The Human Embryo?

PHEE            Yeah. The cells in there, they're really brilliant right, they're Embryonic Stem Cells. Cos they're so young they haven't developed fully yet, so they've got the ability to grow into any other types of cells in the body, you know, brain cells, skin cells, organ cells.

TRACEY        Embryo? As in baby?

PHEE            *No!* Well yes, eventually, if it carried on growing inside a woman.

#### **Issues/Prompts:**

- What are the purposes of stem cell research?
- If the research is not likely to lead to therapies in the near future, what is the point?
- Why do we need to use embryos if we can source stem cells from adults?
- Where do the embryos come from?
- Why are some people opposed to using embryos?
- What about cloned embryos?

## Discussion Trigger 2. When does human life begin?

PHEE            They're just little blobs!

CASSIE        Not to me Phee. To me they are human lives, from the moment of conception.

TRACEY        (TO CASSIE) I agree with you darling. A life is a life, no matter how small it is. Life is sacred. Scientists are just looking at these embryos as if they're laboratory tools or something.

PHEE            What?!! River, please help me out here.

RIV             (WEAKLY, TRYING TO PLEASE THEM ALL) Well, you know, er, maybe, if there is a God, maybe he *created* Scientists to *do* this kind of work?

### Issues/Prompts:

- Does human life begin at conception, birth or somewhere in between?
- Does the potential of embryonic cells to give rise to a life give them a different status to other cells?
- Do embryos have rights equivalent to human rights?

### Discussion Trigger 3.

Is it acceptable to use 'hybrid' embryos (in which human DNA is inserted into the shell or outer layer of an animal egg) for stem cell research?

PHEE But they're going to start using animal eggs though, because then there'd be a bigger supply.

TRACEY (SPLUTTERS FOOD OUT) *Animal* eggs?!!!

PHEE Yeah. Rabbits and cows mostly. It's a really good idea, scrape out the animal DNA, put in the human. They're called Cytoplasmic Hybrids.

TRACEY But what sort of creature do they grow *into*?!!

PHEE I've *told* you! They wouldn't grow into *anything*! They can only use them for 14 days cos after that the Nervous System starts to form. They don't put them back into a woman's womb or anything, that would be gross. Anyway, it's against the law.

TRACEY Thank God for that.

#### Issues/Prompts:

- Is the hybrid embryo animal, human or neither?
- The hybrid embryo is not 'conceived' in the way that a human one is. Does this make it more acceptable to use hybrid embryos for research?
- Does the hybrid embryo have a moral status?
- Who creates the laws governing the 'do's and don'ts' of scientific research?
- How are these laws agreed upon?

## Discussion Trigger 4.

### Is it OK to use preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) to select out embryos with genetic disorders?

- RIV            We can have IVF so we can do PGD. Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis.
- CASSIE        (FLOURISHING LEAFLETS) I know what it means.
- RIV            We can select out the embryos with Huntington's Disease.
- CASSIE        I *know* and I don't want to do it!
- RIV            Put back in the ones that haven't got it. We can have a healthy baby.
- CASSIE        I *know* and I don't want to do it!
- RIV            I knew you'd say this, that's why I told you you could go!
- CASSIE        I don't want to 'select out' Huntington's embryos. Embryos are living things.
- RIV            Cassie...
- CASSIE        They are God's creation. I just want to have a baby, I don't care if its got Huntington's or anything else for that matter. Babies are a gift from God and we should cherish them, whatever they turn out like.
- RIV            I'm not going to have a child with you if it has to live its life under the shadow of this disease.

#### Issues/Prompts:

- Is the decision to use available technology in order to avoid having a child with a genetic disorder disrespectful to the people who have that disorder?
- Is 'choosing' your child in this way unnatural or 'playing God'?
- Is it kinder to the child to do everything possible to ensure that it won't suffer in later life?
- How is this kind of prevention of genetic disorders different from fertility treatment?

## Discussion Trigger 5. How are believers from certain faiths stereotyped?

RIV            So, you're a, em, churchgoer then are you?

CASSIE       I'm a Christian.

RIV            (LOOKING AT HER FEET) I don't see no socks and sandals.

CASSIE       Yes, you'd never know just by looking at me would you?

RIV            Have you, er, always . . .

CASSIE       Always. I was born wearing Birkenstocks over little lace booties.

RIV            Do you . . . live round here?

CASSIE       Yeah, near the Children's Hospital. I'm a nurse.

RIV            Ah! An Angel.

### Issues/Prompts:

- How do we categorise people from different faiths, eg. Christian and Muslim?
- Are these stereotypes based on fact?
- Do these ideas lead to misunderstanding/conflict?
- Are most of us open to getting to know someone from a faith/background very different from our own? Why/why not?

## Discussion Trigger 6.

If stem cell research were to result in therapies and cures, who would have access to treatment?

TRACEY (KINDLY) I'm sure your Dr. Khaled has told you, most of these things are still a long way off happening, *if* they ever do happen.

PHEE I know but . . .

TRACEY And even if they do find a cure for Huntington's one day, I bet it's only people who can afford it who'll get to have it.

### Issues/Prompts:

- If stem cell therapies were rare and expensive, who would have control over them?
- What policies could be put in place to ensure equal access to treatment?
- Would there be a difference between developing and developed countries?

## Discussion Trigger 7. Should 'surplus' IVF embryos be donated for scientific research?

CASSIE        It's alright River. (TO PHEE) Yes, they asked us. River wanted to give them for research, I didn't really, but, well, in the end we did.

AWKWARD MOMENT, THEN:

PHEE            But that's brilliant! That's/

RIVER(Same time) Shut up Phee

PHEE            But I don't understand...[why]

CASSIE        Phee it was hard enough for me even .doing this in the first place. If it was up to me I would never have even screened for Huntington's.

PHEE            Oh don't be ridiculous!

RIV             Don't speak to Cassie like that.

PHEE            You can't just . . . The Huntington's embryos would be destroyed anyway!

CASSIE        I don't like the idea of scientists playing God with them. I think it would have been better for them to be allowed to die.

### Issues/Prompts:

- IVF stands for in vitro fertilization, a procedure that assists couples who cannot conceive naturally to have a baby
- Several embryos are created for each IVF treatment, to maximize the possibility of having a baby
- Every couple who are infertile have the right to one chance at IVF on the NHS. Otherwise it is very expensive. Is it a good use of public money?
- Scientists can use surplus IVF embryos for research with the parents' consent
- Would you allow an embryo of yours to be used for research?

## Discussion Trigger 8.

How much of our 'parentage' do we get from our genes, and how much from our environment?

TRACEY      Your Father was a classical musician, I just thought it would be in your genes that's all.

PHEE        He wasn't my father, he was a donor.

CASSIE      A what?

PHEE        A donor. She brought some sperm from a sperm bank while she was on holiday in America. My donor played four classical instruments, spoke five languages and climbed mountains in his spare time.

CASSIE      Blimey!

### Issues/Prompts:

- Are our parents the people who bring us up, or the people who conceive us?
- How much can we tell about our future from our genes?
- Would you want to know if you had inherited a late onset disorder such as Huntington's?