

## 1 **Born a girl (or boy)?**

2 original at:

3 <http://www.economist.com/node/17797036>

4 The story of sex determination starts with DNA, says neurologist Donald  
5 Pfaff, a leading expert on how hormones affect the brain. Your genes  
6 launch you onto a male or female trajectory. But as Mr Pfaff explains, if  
7 for any reason your hormones fail to follow suit, you can grow up  
8 assuming the other gender.

9 Even if your genes and hormones are in synch, environmental factors can  
10 reroute the gender train. Under stressful conditions, for example, a  
11 pregnant woman's adrenal glands pump out abnormal levels of a female  
12 hormone, progesterone, feminising the developing brain of a male fetus.

13 What's more, the process of sex determination is not over by birth, but  
14 continues into life, up to and including puberty. And, when it comes to  
15 humans and sex, variety is infinite.

16 Although the brains of men and women show significant differences, these  
17 only pertain to those primitive behaviours which include mating, parenting  
18 and aggression. When it comes to higher functions—the skills that  
19 arguably make us human—the similarities outweigh the differences. On  
20 average, men and women score equally on mathematical and reading  
21 ability, for example. Reported differences in empathy, leadership and  
22 verbal fluency have all been exaggerated, according to Mr Pfaff. Where  
23 differences in these skills do exist, the causes may lie in the social  
24 context. The rise of the high-achieving "alpha girl" is in part due to social  
25 changes that have allowed girls equal access to education. The reasons  
26 why many boys perform poorly at school are complex, but partly social  
27 too.

28 Strongly masculine and strongly feminine genders mark each end of the  
29 spectrum, argues Mr Pfaff. In between, every permutation is possible, and  
30 the same goes for sexual orientation. Society, however, still frets over  
31 what to do about children whose behaviour falls in the middle.

## Questions

- 1) According to the article, can you be born a girl even though you were originally meant to be a boy?
- 2) Paraphrase 'Your genes launch you onto a male or female trajectory' (lines 5 and 6).
- 3) What, according to the article, determines the sex of a human being?
- 4) Paraphrase 'environmental factors can reroute the gender train'(line 9 and 10).
- 5) Has nature endowed males with a greater intellectual capacity than females?
- 6) Are women better than men at imagining how others may feel in a particular situation?
- 7) Do the male and female genders occur in pure form in humans according to the article?
- 8) Are the gender roles in our society 'pure' or do they come in mixed forms?

## Vocabulary

**follow suit** (line 7) – to follow the example of another

**what's more** (line 13) – in addition, furthermore

**reported** (line 21) – alleged, asserted

**fret** (line 30) – to feel or express worry, annoyance, discontent, or the like

You can find additional explanation and more examples to help you understand and use English words and phrases at <http://dictionary.reference.com>, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> or <http://www.ldoceonline.com/>

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