

Three cheers for Lucas

In a week dominated by the Winter Olympics and news of partisan combat (of course) in Washington, D.C., I am transfixed by the contagious smile of one little boy named Lucas Warren.

Lucas has been chosen as the “Gerber spokesbaby” for 2018, so his joyful face will be used to promote Gerber baby products this year. He is the first child with Down syndrome to represent Gerber in its 90 years. His dad Jason Warren says he hopes the award “will shed a little bit of light on the special needs community and help more individuals with special needs be accepted and not limited.”

I share that hope, especially after seeing more negative news lately about attitudes toward children like Lucas. Consider the following.

Since 2007, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists has recommended offering prenatal testing for the syndrome to all pregnant women. In the great majority of cases, a positive diagnosis of Down syndrome is followed by abortion. Increasingly common now are less invasive blood tests that “screen” for the condition — that is, they show only a likelihood, not an actual finding, that a child will be affected. Yet abortion is offered in those cases as well.

Based on the widespread use of such testing, Iceland is reportedly very close to eliminating Down syndrome — meaning that it has nearly eliminated the live births of affected children. One counselor involved in the program says she is “preventing suffering.”

Realizing that many such families are scared into aborting by misleading information and stereotypes, foundations sponsoring World Down Syndrome Day produced a beautiful video in 2014 called “Dear Future Mom.” It features children and young

adults with the condition speaking in various languages about the things they can achieve, and the love and happiness they share with their mothers. “Don’t be afraid,” says one young woman.

In France, the government responded to this positive message with a nationwide ban on airing the video on television. It was deemed “inappropriate” because it may lead women who have aborted a child with Down syndrome to feel guilty. A little over a year ago, despite many petitions urging it to reconsider, the government reaffirmed its ban.

But of course, the very public ban on this life-affirming video can only be seen as trying to make parents who allowed their children to live feel guilty.

In saying that children with Down syndrome can be happy and bring happiness to others, the video makes an understatement.

In 2011 studies in the American Journal of Medical Genetics, Harvard-trained physician Brian Skotko found that 99 percent of people with Down syndrome say they are happy with their lives; 99 percent of their parents say they love them and 97 percent are proud of them, with similar results from their siblings. Only 4 percent of parents regret having a child with the condition.

Yet there are plenty of physicians and ethicists with a utilitarian streak who work to eliminate some of the happiest and most loving people on earth. I am sure these experts are very smart. But then all the wars, genocides and pogroms in history were started by people who (as they would be the first to tell you) are very smart. So I question the yardstick the experts are using.

For Lucas and his parents, congratulations! Keep breaking down these prejudices. For the rest of us: Take a look at “Dear Future Mom.” After drying your eyes, figure

out how you might help celebrate March 21 as World Down Syndrome Day this year. Future kids like Lucas will be grateful.

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