

# Dear mom, dear son: In their words

---

**USA TODAY - McLean, Va.  
August 18, 1997**

Eva Kittay is a philosopher and a mother. Her daughter Sessa, 27, is severely retarded and has cerebral palsy. Her son Leo, 21, is an aspiring actor who recently completed a philosophy degree.

A few months ago, in the course of her work, Kittay was asked a question: Does aborting a fetus that will become a disabled child send a message that the lives of such people are not worth living?

Does it devalue people like her own beloved Sessa, a young woman who cannot speak but can kiss and hug and laugh?

Kittay, a professor at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, said no. Women make such decisions for many reasons. But she asked her son: If she had such an abortion, would it send a message to him about the value of his sister?

He said yes.

And the two began an extraordinary exchange of letters that have become part of a scholarly debate on the issue organized by the Hastings Center:

"We have garnered tremendous joy and learned more than one can imagine from our daughter, and yet the decision to have a child with such severe and multiple handicaps is not one I can easily endorse. I think it is terribly cruel to burden a couple with the responsibility for a severely handicapped child when prenatal testing can determine in advance the condition of the fetus." -- Eva Kittay, to son Leo

"Beware the slippery slope, Mom. Are not all children a burden? If someday we could determine that a fetus will develop into a hyperactive child or into one with recurring ear infections, will these children's births also have to be expressly willed? Children are a burden. But it is incredibly important to keep making them and tolerating them. No, Mom?" -- Leo Kittay, to Eva

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

