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Plastic Surgery and Adolescents

In an essay written by Douglas J. Opel and Benjamin S. Wilfond, they present an argument that claims that parents who choose to have their children with disabilities have cosmetic surgery, are causing the child harm and are doing it for their benefit only. In this paper, I will show that their argument is valid and sound. I will proceed as follows. First, I will present and explain the argument that cosmetic surgery on cognitively disabled children is harmful and a violation of personal autonomy and rights to one's own body; when deciding to make someone have an unnecessary surgery for one's own personal benefit. Then, I will use a counterexample to show objections to the presented premises and conclusion.

Plastic Surgery for Children with Cognitive Disabilities Argument

1. If cosmetic surgery violates the child's autonomy, then cosmetic surgery on children is wrong.
2. Cosmetic surgery violates the child's autonomy.
3. Therefore, cosmetic surgery on children is morally wrong. 1,2 Modus Ponens

Cosmetic surgery is classified as changing the appearance of something on a person's body. Common types of cosmetic surgery are breast augmentation, rhinoplasty (nose job), and liposuction. Cosmetic surgery allows for a person to reshape or change anything on their body that they do not like, or that they feel insecure about. These surgeries are not usually considered necessary medical procedures, thus are not covered by insurance. This is excluding cases where these procedures have to take place for health reasons. Plastic surgery is advertised among all

ages. Among youth, plastic surgery is seen as a way to enhance oneself or change perceived flaws about oneself. Among adults, plastic surgery is advertised as a way to look youthful again. In recent years, plastic surgery is becoming extremely common among adolescents.

Autonomy is defined as the right to the decisions of what to do with one's own life and body. Autonomy can also be put into political terms as the ownership of oneself with the ability to make decisions for oneself.

When Douglas J. Opel and Benjamin S. Wilfond argue for the thesis that parents who consent to having their child with cognitive disabilities have plastic surgery are only causing potential harm to the child to benefit the parents, he relies on two main premises. The first premise is if cosmetic surgery violates the child's autonomy, then cosmetic surgery on children is wrong. The authors use a utilitarian approach to the topic. Utilitarianism is a theory where it has every act on an ethical scale of happiness. The theory advocates for actions that maximize happiness. This means that an act is determined morally good or morally bad by how much happiness it produces. The authors use the theory of utilitarianism to make the point that some parents who have children with cognitive disabilities, that affect their cosmetic appearance, proceed with cosmetic surgery with the intentions of benefiting themselves and others. For example, parents choose to have their child go through plastic surgery so their child looks, in terms of societal cohesion, normal. In the parents eyes, the surgery benefits them in terms of having the appearance of a normal child and with reduce questions or discrimination of the child's disability. However, having a cosmetic surgery causes physical harm unto the child. If the child's cosmetic appearance causes them no harm, cosmetic surgery is an unnecessary harm.

Thus, violating the child's right of autonomy to benefit the parent. In terms of utilitarianism, the cosmetic surgery benefits more people than it harms.

In the second premise, the authors argue that cosmetic surgery violates the child's autonomy. I agree with the authors that cosmetic surgery for non-health related problems is a severe violation of the child's right to their own body. The authors use the example of a child experiencing a severe skateboarding accident that leaves him completely paralyzed physically and cognitively. He stays in bed and only leaves to go to the doctor in a wheel chair, which is fully stable and moved by nurses. The accident left him with part of his skull missing, leaving part of his brain only covered by skin. It does not cause him harm and there is no chance of it harming him. The ethical scenario is that his parents want to take him in for plastic surgery to put in an implant that would get rid of the dent and form a smooth appearance. The surgery would only be for their own benefit of having their child look normal. It is argued that the surgery is unnecessary and only inflicts pain on the child. The authors argue that it is morally wrong to force the child to have the surgery; especially, if the child's cognitive abilities prevent them from communicating. This would mean that the parent(s) is/are deciding without consent of the child. Ethically, the parent(s) is/are causing unnecessary harm to the child, and only harming the child for the benefit of oneself.

There are potential objections to this argument. One objection being that adolescents are not legally of age to solely make decisions for themselves. Thus, the parental figures are in charge of all decisions. In this objection the child is not in charge of their own body, meaning no autonomy. The argument being that cosmetic surgery on children is not morally wrong because cosmetic surgery does not violate the child's autonomy.

Another objection someone could make is that having a cosmetic procedure may cause better chances of adequate healthcare for the child. Although it is vain, parents feel as though nurses or physicians will provide better care for their child if their child looks normal. A counterexample to the example given by Opel and Wilfond, the surgery to have an implant in his skull would increase the chances of having their son acquire better healthcare. It is a common fear of parents worry that medical professionals or other resources may only do the bare minimum for their child because their appearance is not normal in society. The objection would mainly be based off of parents believing that medical professionals or other resources may have unintentional biases.

In conclusion, my goal was to show why I believe that the authors argument is valid and sound. I presented and explained the argument that plastic surgery on cognitively disabled children is harmful and a violation of personal autonomy and rights to ones own body; when deciding to make someone have an unnecessary surgery for ones own personal benefit. I agree with premise one, premise two, and the conclusion. In my personal opinion of the subject, I do not think that children with disabilities should be forced to go through cosmetic surgery because their parent wants them to look normal. I feel as though this is a selfish act of harm onto the child. Especially, if the cosmetic defect is not causing physical or psychological harm to the child. Children should have a right to what happens medically to their own bodies, if the surgery is not needed for health related issues.

Works Cited

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