

A perfect world

The 1997 science fiction film GATTACA is set in the 'not-too-distant future'. This is a world where embryos are screened before they are implanted in their mothers, to ensure perfect health and wellbeing. Each baby's life expectancy and disease likelihood are tested and determined at birth. Society no longer discriminates on the basis of religion, race or gender, but on your genes.

Vincent, however, is a genetically imperfect ('in-valid') person in a genetically perfect world. He was born with a heart defect dooming him to die at about 30, and is myopic (short-sighted), meaning he can only work as a cleaner.

But Vincent dreams of travelling to Jupiter's moon, Titan. He assumes the identity of Jerome, a crippled athlete, who has genes that will allow him to achieve his dream of space travel.

With Jerome's identity, Vincent can work at the aerospace company GATTACA and pass their daily gene tests by using samples of Jerome's hair, blood and urine. Things become more complicated, however, when the Titan mission controller is found murdered shortly before the launch. Vincent's own DNA is found at the scene in one hair – as an in-valid he had no reason to be there, making him the prime suspect. Will Vincent make it to Titan, or be arrested for murder?

This film explores many important issues in human uses of biotechnology, including the real-world effects of genetic testing and pre-implantation testing of embryos.

You will need:

- Access to a DVD or video copy of GATTACA, a player and television

What to do:

1. Watch the film GATTACA.
2. By yourself, think about what this film has to say about:
 - discrimination and prejudice
 - the human desire for perfection and whether perfection makes us happy
 - whether genes alone can predict our paths in life
 - what happens when someone wants a life other than that determined by their genes
 - whether knowing too much about our genes is a good or bad thing.

3. Form groups of four or five people. Discuss and write down your answers to the following questions.
 - What effects did genetic testing have on Vincent and Jerome's lives? How are they different?
 - How accurate do you think testing at birth for life expectancy and disease susceptibility would be? Would there be any differences between the prediction and the actual outcomes? Why would they be different?
 - Is it fair to discriminate against people whose genes are not 'perfect'? Is it already happening?
 - Who decides what constitutes perfection in the first place?
4. Compare your answers with the rest of the class.