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Family Life After Donor Conception

Grandparents' Stories:
Parents of heterosexual couples with children conceived using donor sperm or eggs

When a couple start a family using donor sperm or eggs, it is an event that is important not just for them, but for their whole family. This leaflet is written for the parents of heterosexual couples who have, or are planning, children using donor conception.

It is based on many hours of research interviews, during which parents and grandparents of donor-conceived children told us about their experiences of family life after donor conception.

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Offering support

The process of donor conception can be physically and emotionally draining and, for the couples we interviewed, their parents were often the first port of call for support. Grandparents provided all kinds of support to their adult children, from taking them to clinic appointments, financial support towards the cost of treatment, and most commonly, listening to and supporting them when times were hard. In this way, the donor conception process could come to play a large part in the daily life of the grandparents, often over several years. As one grandmother put it:

I think for those three or four years… it was the biggest thing in my life.

The mother-daughter (or daughter-in-law) relationship was often particularly significant. Some daughters phoned their mothers every day for support when treatment was intense, and mothers could be the first to know if there was another treatment failure.

Fathers were also concerned, though their role tended to be less hands-on. Parents of infertile sons were less involved, perhaps because either the son or the parents did not want to, or felt unable to, talk about infertility or the conception process.

Grandparents and adult children could feel tensions around this need for increased support. For example, adult children might choose their mother as their confidante but feel ambivalent about having to lean on her more at a stage when they were used to feeling more grown-up and independent. Grandparents felt that it was their role to provide this support, but had to balance being there for their children with respecting their privacy and autonomy in their decisions about starting a family and parenting.

Respecting privacy

Grandparents often gave a lot of support to the couple (especially the woman) undergoing donor conception treatment but they were also usually asked to keep the information about the treatment secret. This meant that they themselves absorbed a lot of the stress and distress involved, without being able to ease their burden by sharing it with close friends or family (as talking about it would have given away private information about their son or daughter). This could be a real burden for grandparents.

Equally, grandparents who were taking a lot of time out to support clinic visits could not explain these absences to friends and family. The donor conception process could also cause tensions in the wider family. For example, if a couple undergoing donor conception withdrew from family gatherings, perhaps because they found seeing their relatives' young children difficult, the grandparents would know the cause of their behaviour but be unable to explain it to other family members who might be hurt or annoyed by it. One grandmother said:

So all that time, it was only me who knew. So I had to keep sort of, shelving my mother off and my sister, and it took a toll. And every time anybody got pregnant… My daughter was physically sick when she knew that her sister was pregnant. It was awful. I mean it just tore my family apart actually.

When a grandchild arrives

The birth of a child after what was often the long and difficult process of donor conception was always a cause for celebration. Grandparents sometimes worried before the birth that the child might not 'belong' in the family, or be treated differently to other grandchildren. For most grandparents, these concerns reduced hugely when the baby arrived, as this grandmother explained:

I mean when your grandchildren arrive they're just the same as any of the others. They're there, they're babies, you love them. You form a bond with them. How they are made, I consider to be utterly irrelevant. I mean there are practicalities about that, I don't underestimate that, but they're just the same as the other kids, that's all.

Even though none of the grandparents we interviewed were at all hostile about the idea of having a grandchild through donor conception, some concerns sometimes lingered. These could often be traced to worries about how other people would relate to the child, or potential problems in the future. Grandparents might worry (in the case of sperm donation) that the child's father might somehow feel they were not a "true" father.

In some cases, grandparents' keenness to smooth over potential worries, perhaps by commenting positively on resemblances with non-genetic parents, or other family members, was a sign of their anxiety which perversely could draw more attention to the issue. This varied from family to family. Some parents liked it when grandparents commented on resemblances between their grandchild and their non-genetic parent. In some cases though, parents who weren't genetically related to their

child could find it awkward or difficult when other people drew attention to family resemblances.

However, as the grandchildren grew, grandparents were much more likely than parents to prefer to put the donor conception process firmly behind them and ignore it wherever possible. Most grandparents did this either because they thought the donor conception was not very relevant and not something that needed dwelling on, or in order not to draw attention to any differences between their donor-conceived grandchild and any other children.

One grandmother who didn't have any genetic connection to her grandson simply said:

> *You see, we don't think of him as donor-conceived. He's ours.*

In fact, we spoke to some parents who told us that grandparents had simply and truthfully 'forgotten' that their grandchild was donor conceived.

Fears for the future?

Some grandparents who took part in our project worried that there might be troubles ahead for their donor-conceived grandchildren. They could worry that the difficult process of their conception led to them being 'over-loved' or spoiled by their parents, which they thought might lead to problems in the future.

Grandparents also had concerns that their grandchild might be teased or bullied for being donor-conceived. Some were uncertain about having 'stranger' genes in the family, worrying that they may bring some unknown physical or psychological impact lurking in the future. One grandfather said:

> *The complications arise later. When he's a teenager, he'll probably throw it back at everybody around him.*

Other grandparents felt these concerns became less important as the child got older, as this grandmother explains:

> *I'm a great believer in nurture. I suppose it's 50% nature, 50% nurture, but I think that nurture's terribly important. I mean, bringing up a child is what makes you closer to it. That's where the closeness comes from, you know, not the genes so much.*

Of course, worrying about the future is something that many grandparents do, whether or not the grandchildren are donor-conceived!

Thinking about the donor

It could be hard for grandparents to work out exactly how the donor fitted in (or not) to their family. Most heterosexual couples who shared their stories with us did not know much, or anything, about their donor. This could lead grandparents to wonder what their donor-conceived grandchild would inherit from their donor. Grandparents were often intrigued if their grandchild had different eye or hair colour to their parents or siblings. For example, one couple always put their grandson's ability in swimming down to his sperm donor, because his parents weren't at all sporty! And another set of grandparents joked that their grandson's love of olives must be something he got from his Spanish sperm donor as none of the rest of the family like them.

Where a child was donor-conceived, there was a tendency to wonder if this particular difference could be explained by their donor genes.

Grandparents also wondered about donor siblings ie children conceived from eggs or sperm from the same donor as their grandchild. In some cases where donor eggs had been used, couples knew their donor and sometimes it was even a family member (maybe a cousin or a sister). This could lead to some confusion about exactly what these relationships meant, and how they should work. Once again, as donor-conceived children don't come with a full set of instructions for families, each family had to puzzle this out for themselves, working out the best solution for their particular family.

More similar than different

Families with donor-conceived children are a relatively new kind of family. Being a 'different' family can bring challenges, though in our research we noticed a general trend for worries (about donor conception at least!) to shrink as children grew. The issue of donor conception didn't disappear, but it just became a part of everyday family life. And this 'everydayness' is a good point to remember: the families we spoke to were distinctive because of how they were made, but the day to day whirlwind of life with babies and young children soon made their family life just as loving, chaotic, messy, exasperating and funny as the family next door.

About our research

Our research is based on 74 in-depth interviews with parents and grandparents of donor-conceived children in the UK. The project, called 'Relative Strangers' explored the impact of donor conception on family life.

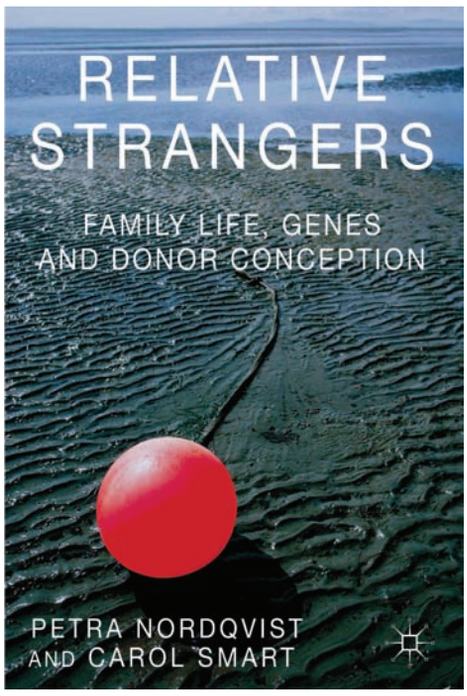
The project was carried out by Dr Petra Nordqvist and Professor Carol Smart from the Morgan Centre, University of Manchester. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

More information

See our website for more information about the project, and more leaflets for parents, grandparents, and professionals working with families of donor-conceived children.

www.manchester.ac.uk/relative-strangers

Dr Petra Nordqvist and Professor Carol Smart have written a book of the project, called *Relative Strangers: Family life, genes and donor conception* published by Palgrave (RRP £19.99).



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