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Family Life After Donor Conception

Parents' Stories:
Lesbian couples starting a family using donor sperm

This leaflet is for lesbian couples who already have, or who are planning, children using donor sperm. 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. This leaflet is our way of sharing their stories with families in a similar situation.

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Making a two-mum family

A lot of the challenges to being a two-mother family come from the same place as the challenges of being a lesbian couple: our society is less used to same-sex relationships than heterosexual relationships.

Society still has default 'patterns' that families are expected to fit into and two-mother families are not a well-known family pattern. Two-mum families are not very visible in public life, on television or in health visitor leaflets or children's books.

Lesbian mothers we spoke to put a lot of thought and effort into thinking about what their new family would be like, for instance, what the children would call their mothers, how they would refer to the donor, and how much (if any) contact a known donor would have with the child or children.

Creating family links with non-birth mother

Lesbian mothers knew from the start that their child would only share a genetic link with one mother. All the couples we spoke to said they were worried (to some degree) before the birth that the non-birth mother would not feel a connection to the child, or would feel less like a mother. One non-birth mum said:

> *I was open at the beginning with how much I was going to struggle with not being the biological parent*

But she and her partner had recognised this sense of inequality and had taken steps to make sure the non-birth mum felt as much the mum as the birth mother. (It's important to note here that although these worries didn't disappear altogether when the baby arrived, they were reduced as the non-birth mum could develop a bond through spending time caring for the baby.)

Parents usually liked seeing family resemblances, either in appearance, character, or abilities between them and their children, even when there was no genetic link. One non-birth mum explained how much she enjoyed other people spotting resemblances between her and her daughter:

I think she looks like she's ours. Certainly, my family have commented like, "Oh my God, she really looked like you just now!" … And my sister will say, "You used to do that when you were little" [sighs] I don't know, but I recognise that it's something that I foster and I recognise that I take a small crumb and make a cake out of it. I like it because she's my child. She's my child and I like the physical evidence of it, you know.

Other non-birth mothers could find it difficult when family and friends commented on physical resemblances between their children and the birth mother, as it was a reminder of a genetic link that they would never have, however strong and close their relationship.

Couples tended to take a practical approach to thinking about creating family connections with the non-birth mother. They often planned ways of creating other kinds of links between the child and the non-birth mother, such as having a civil partnership or marriage, or including the non-birth mother's surname in the child's name.

Relationships with wider family

See our website for our leaflet for grandparents: **www.manchester.ac.uk/relative-strangers**

Some grandparents did not expect grandchildren from a same-sex relationship, so many were surprised as

well as delighted when the pregnancy was announced. When the parents of either or both mothers had not fully come to terms with their adult daughter's sexuality, and the issue had sometimes been ignored or pushed aside, the birth of a child could reawaken old tensions with parents or other family members. Some grandparents' discomfort with their daughter's sexuality led to difficult situations when it came to explaining where a baby had appeared from. One mother told us a story about how she had bumped into a family friend she hadn't seen for years, while out shopping with her partner and new baby:

> *I said 'This is my son and this is my partner, Dawn,' and she said 'That explains everything!'. She said she'd run into my dad and he'd said 'Linda's having a baby' and this woman had said 'Oh, who's the father?' and Dad said, 'There is no father.' So he would rather I'd had a one-night stand than actually tell her I'm in a relationship with a woman, and you know, I was quite sad about that, but you know, that's just my dad.*

It was important to mums that their child 'belonged' in the family and grandparents were really important people in helping this happen. Luckily, the vast majority of grandparents were delighted at the new arrival. One (non-genetic) grandmother said, of her grandson:

> *We just took him as our own. You know, from him being born, we just took him as ours.*

Even when relationships between the lesbian couple and one or both sets of grandparents had been tense before the birth, the new baby could be so irresistible to their grandparents that relationships within the family became easier and closer over the years, and were sometimes completely transformed for the better.

Telling children, and others, about their genetic origins

The lesbian mothers we spoke to were happy to tell their children about how

they were conceived, but this did not mean it was a straightforward process.

Firstly, it was also hard for mothers to find the right words to describe the process of donor insemination, and the idea of lesbianism and having two mummies rather than a mummy and a daddy, especially when the child was very young.

> *I think it is important to tell them, it's just finding the right time and the right way. I guess by the time they ask questions about other children I'd like to think they've got answers by then. I want to be able to give them a story, an answer that isn't either untrue but also isn't about sperm and test tubes.*

Often, parents had to refine and develop their stories of how their family came to be as the child grew and their understanding increased.

Being comfortable to be open about how a child was conceived did not mean that mothers wanted to share the information with everybody. Often they wanted to have some control over who knew, to protect their family's privacy. This could be hard once other adults knew, as they might 'let it slip' or not appreciate the sensitivity of the situation. Often mothers wanted their child to be the first to know, and for them to decide who else was told:

> *What we say when people ask about it is 'No, I appreciate you want to know but we think it's really important that our son is the first person to know that'*

Even when mothers felt comfortable being open about donor conception, we came across a few cases where grandparents were not. Here, lesbian mothers might end up avoiding a controversial topic with family members in order to preserve the relationship between their child and its grandparents.

Family life with a 'known' donor

It was quite common for lesbian couples to arrange donor insemination without going to a clinic and use a 'known' donor instead. How involved these 'known' donors were in family life after the birth could vary a lot. Some 'known' donors were identity release donors who donated via a clinic, so although the child could trace them when they were 18, they did not play a large part in day-to-day life when the child was young.

Other donors were known personally to the couple, though again how well they were known varied hugely. Some couples met the donor just a few times and others

wanted a donor who played some role in the child's life. (We didn't speak to any couples who had a co-parenting relationship or who shared parenting with a donor.) Couples who chose a known donor usually told us it was a way of allowing the child to know their origins.

I had this image of this child asking me, "Who is my dad?" and me saying, "We don't know and you will never know" and I really didn't want to do that.

Understanding how these relationships might work in practice is incredibly complex, and it was something that couples had to think through for themselves, and negotiate with the donor: for example, do the donor's parents 'count' as grandparents to the child? Even in the same family, different people might have very different ideas of these relationships and it could create tensions. Other couples found that ideas about relationships with the donor changed over time, for instance when a friend agreed to donate sperm without being involved in family life after the birth, and then discovered that he felt a strong connection to the child and wanted to be more involved.

Family life with an 'unknown' donor

Some couples we spoke to opted for an anonymous sperm donor, either because they couldn't find a suitable donor or because it felt less threatening to the status of both mothers as the two parents of the child, and so they could make decisions together without a third party having a say or interfering:

For us, it just seemed best that it was anonymous and that there wasn't a third wheel kind of. I don't know, with the best will in the world and even if they're your closest friend, you're still not going to see eye to eye on things, and I think it would be messy and you know not the best thing for a child I suppose, in my particular opinion.

Unknown sperm donors still played a role in family life. Mothers might wonder if a particular characteristic or skill of their child was inherited from the donor.

Donor 'siblings'

Mothers did sometimes feel curious, or uncomfortable, about the idea that their child might have genetic half-siblings through their donor. Many mothers knew that their child had donor siblings, or that it was likely, and this could play on their minds. One mother said:

There's one element of it all that still slightly freaks me out, which is that there are half-siblings. … There's just something odd about it, I can't find the word, there's something quite disturbing about it.

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.

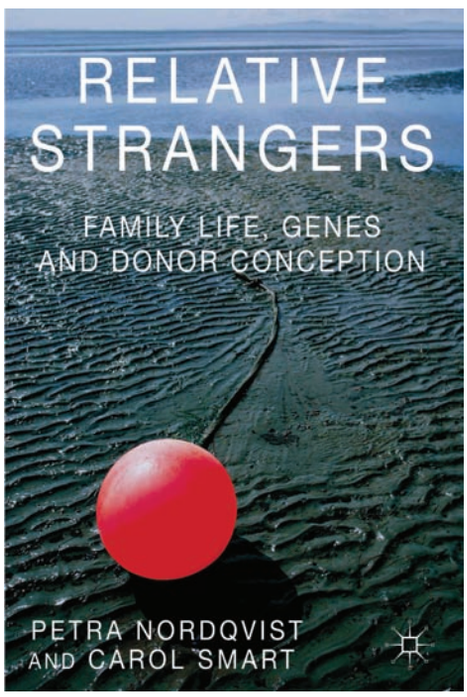
The project was carried out by Dr Petra Nordqvist and Professor Carol Smart from the Morgan Centre, University of Manchester. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

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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