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Family Life After Donor Conception

Grandparents' Stories:
Parents of lesbian couples with children conceived using donor sperm

When a couple start a family using donor sperm, it is an event that is important not just for them, but for their whole family. This leaflet is written for the parents of lesbian 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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The importance of family

With the birth of their first child, a lesbian couple becomes a two-mother family. This is a change for them, and also for their parents. Some grandparents were unfamiliar with this new kind of family model and this led to concerns about whether their grandchild or their daughter and her partner might face discrimination.

Lesbian parents we interviewed for our research felt that good relationships with grandparents and other family members were important for helping their donor-conceived child feel like they belonged.

First reactions to pregnancy

Often grandparents had not expected grandchildren from a lesbian relationship and were not familiar with the idea of donor conception. Many were surprised as well as delighted by the news of the pregnancy. One lesbian mum said:

> *I can remember when I came out to my mum, one of the things she really cried about was 'I won't have grandchildren'. And I think that was probably more of a loss for her than many other things associated with being gay. So when we started talking about getting pregnant and having a baby she was delighted.*

Genetic and non-genetic grandparents

We found that how grandparents felt often depended on whether or not they had a genetic link with their grandchild (ie whether or not it was their daughter who was the birth mother). Grandparents whose daughter was the birth mother tended to feel more secure and connected in their relationship with their grandchild.

Grandparents whose daughter was not the birth mother tended to feel less secure about their relationship with their grandchild. They worried that if their daughter split up with the birth mother that they would lose contact with a grandchild they loved very much. These fears were reduced if the mothers were in a civil partnership or married, if they were both named on the birth certificate and if they liked and felt close to their daughter's partner. And for some grandparents, like this grandmother, the lack of a genetic connection was completely unimportant:

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

Some grandparents whose daughter was the non-birth mother also felt sad that there was no genetic connection to their side of the family:

> *My daughter's partner is the birth mother. Which saddened me a little bit because I had kind of hoped that we would have something of our family, maybe even an embryo, an egg, or something.*

We also came across some families where the non-genetic grandparents were very close to their grandchild, but where other relations on the same side of the family, such as uncles and aunts, did not acknowledge the child as part of the family

Family resemblances

Spotting family resemblances with a donor-conceived grandchild was a way for grandparents to make family connections even when there wasn't a genetic link:

> *I mean, you like to see those little characteristics of family in the child. But if you don't, it's okay. You can still really pick them out anyway because everybody's the same. And you know, where I see temper here, I see my brother's temper in my grandson, so it's the same thing.*

Grandparents on both sides did this as a way of bringing the family closer. Many parents liked this, though it could sometimes be awkward or upsetting. Non-genetic mothers could feel left out if people commented on resemblances between their child and the genetic mother. Or they could feel as though people were trying too hard by finding resemblances when there wasn't a genetic link.

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.

In some cases, where the parents knew the sperm donor, it could lead to some confusion about exactly what these relationships meant, and how they should work. For example, are the sperm donor's parents grandparents, too?

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.

Fears for the future (or not)

Some grandparents worried that having children, and becoming a family, made their daughter's sexuality more 'visible' which could lead to discrimination. They also worried that their grandchildren might face discrimination or bullying because their family didn't fit into a traditional, heterosexual pattern.

These grandparents could also feel uncomfortable talking about their daughter's family with other family and friends and some preferred to avoid talking about them, or to gloss over the fact that their grandchild had two mums instead of a mum and a dad.

On the other hand, equal numbers of grandparents we spoke to felt that times had changed and the world was less judgemental. One grandmother spoke about having a married, heterosexual, daughter who chose not to have children, while her lesbian daughter did have a child:

> *It's like "Oh, well, your heterosexual daughter doesn't have a child and your gay daughter does" and you know, the world has changed in many respects and there's an acceptance that this is quite normal.*

Often, grandparents living in areas where two-mother families were more common were more relaxed about the future, as they could see other people living happily in similar families.

Even grandparents who were quite relaxed about the future could feel a bit protective about telling absolutely everybody they knew about the full facts of their grandchildren's circumstances.

Building a new family

For many grandparents we spoke to, two-mother families were not something they had first-hand experience of before their grandchild was born, so it was usually a case of 'learning on the job' for the whole family!

We did come across a tiny percentage of families where grandparents refused to acknowledge their lesbian daughter's children. We also know that there are likely to be other cases of families who wouldn't have come forward to take part in our research.

However, this should not overshadow the experiences of most of the families of lesbian couples we spoke to who found that the birth of a grandchild signalled a positive change in their family relationships. When grandparents felt comfortable with their daughter's sexuality it was usually easier for them to fit the new two-mother family unit into the wider family.

If there were lingering tensions about the daughter's sexuality, getting used to things took a bit more work. Before the arrival of a grandchild, some grandparents had dealt with their daughter's sexuality by putting it to the back of their minds, and the arrival of a baby made this harder to ignore. Often, the new grandchild acted as a bit of an icebreaker, strengthening the relationship between the baby's mothers and its grandparents.

One lesbian mother described how her own mother, who was, at first, quite shocked when she announced she was pregnant, became besotted with her grandchildren and through this relationship became much more comfortable with the idea of same-sex relationships in her family. The mother told us:

> *She [the grandmother] has gone from being someone who would never have told any of her friends, to telling everyone and whenever we went home with either of the children, she'd invite all her friends round… But now she's got friend who've got gay children so she's had more of a, kind of, exposure if you like.*

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.

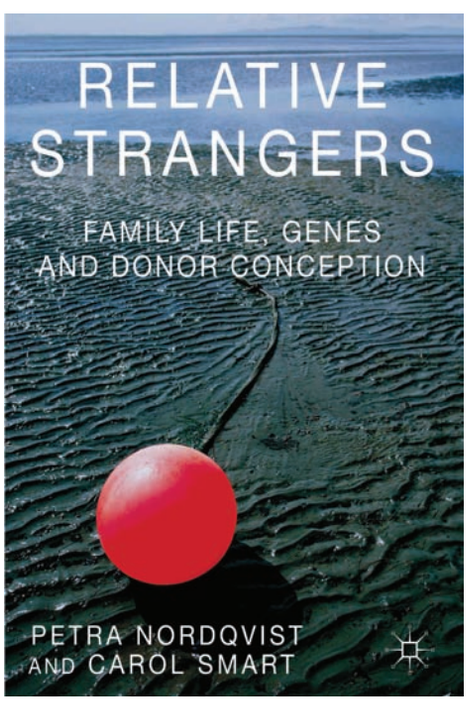
The project was carried out by Dr Petra Nordqvist and Professor Carol Smart from the Morgan Centre, University of Manchester. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

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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