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Family Life After Donor Conception

Parents' Stories:
Heterosexual couples starting a family using donor sperm or eggs

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

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The difficult decision to use a donor

Couples in our research often tried for a baby for years before deciding to use a donor. Some tried as many as nine cycles of IVF and when they were advised that donor conception was the way forward, it often took months or years to come to terms with the decision.

For all the couples we interviewed having a child who was genetically related to at least one of them was seen as more desirable than adoption. One dad said:

> *So we saw having our own family, you know, by 'normal means' as the number one option. So I guess we thought, "Well, if that's not possible, the next best option is to have children that are as near as you can get".*

Men, women and infertility

Men and women had very different experiences of donor conception even though couples started on the process as a joint project. It was, for example, often clear that it was the women who were driving the process and who sometimes had a stronger commitment to having children.

When women discovered they were infertile they were often extremely upset. They described their feelings to us as grief, anger, cross with the world and a huge sense of failure. However, using donor eggs meant that they could still experience a pregnancy and give birth, which they found comforting. This biological link created a bond from the moment of conception which helped reduce the sadness of not sharing a genetic link with their child. One mum explained this in her own words:

> *So I felt that lack of being a woman you know, that was a very strong feeling initially, but being pregnant I felt like I was helping make that baby, so a third part of the cog.*

Some men in our research knew they were infertile before they tried to start a family. But most infertile men only discovered there was a problem only after trying to conceive for years. These men had to cope with the shock of infertility at the same time as dealing with their feelings about not having a genetic connection to their child. Some felt their infertility as a failure as a man (to produce a child) and as a partner (to give their partner the thing she most wanted) and this was a deep source of sadness. Men often dealt with these feelings very privately, especially if they felt an expectation to 'get over' them in order to focus on the new pregnancy. So they could be feeling hugely mixed emotions when those around them were expecting them to be happy and excited about the new arrival.

Their consolation was that their partners had conceived and that, together, they had a baby to raise from 'day one', as one dad explained:

> *I turned to the counsellor and I said "Well how do you deal with this stuff?" She said "The truth is you don't, you kind of, you live with it". Which was a nice sort of thing and I think it helped me massively, that speech. It means you don't have to come out the other side and everything be okay, you just live with it and you deal with it and you try and let it affect you as little as possible.*

Telling children and others about using a donor

It used to be that parents were encouraged to keep donor conception a secret, but in recent years the policy has shifted towards openness. Parents are now encouraged to tell their children that they are born as a result of egg, sperm or embryo donation.

This development is very recent and so we found that there is no established way of talking about donor conception in families. Parents were often committed to the idea of being open, and yet found that the process of telling was far from straightforward. For example, they felt uncertain about how to broach such a complex topic with their children, about what age they should start to tell them, and about how to talk of eggs and sperm often with tiny children.

Children who were told very young could interpret the information in unexpected ways, or bring the topic up when their parents were least expecting it. Often, this led to slightly funny situations where parents had to take a deep breath and get on with a conversation with their toddler about sperm and eggs even if it did raise a few eyebrows from passers-by. Of course though, the toddler could be raising a topic that the parents felt conflicted or upset by, and this could be a painful reminder for them.

Parents also found that they needed to tell close friends or family about the nature of the conception but here too they found the lack of a ready available social script or 'narrative' meant that broaching such conversations could be very difficult.

Some parents preferred to keep the topic more confidential, often because they felt the information was special to their child, and they wanted to wait a little while until the child could understand it more fully and choose who they wanted to tell.

We also found that a consequence of being open was that parents were no longer able to control information about their personal or private lives and this could be very difficult for some of them. For example, one couple wanted to keep the donor conception private to family only, and fell out with their child's uncle when he shared the information more widely.

Other families were keen to be open about using donor gametes, but worried about whether this would lead to their child being discriminated against or rejected by family:

The biggest worry I had when we were starting to tell was that anybody would reject our daughter. It's a real gut reaction thing, you know, to protect your child. The thought that anybody might say 'Oh well, she's not part of our family, is she?'.

Family life with an 'unknown' donor

Even when couples knew little or nothing about the donor, they did not forget about them after the baby was born. Donors could have a 'presence' in family life even when there was no contact at all. A mother who used donor eggs expressed this when she described her anonymous donor as a 'ghost in the room' in the first year after her daughters were born. She said:

And there was like another person around, but they don't have a face or a shape. And you're looking at the babies and going 'Who are they like? Where's this come from?'

Typically though, families thought about the donor less as their child grew. Knowing so little about the donor meant that parents found themselves 'filling in the gaps' and wondering if the child looked like the donor, or had their characteristics or skills.

Family life with a 'known' donor

When couples know the identity of their donor, the boundaries that exist between families may become rather blurred. The links between the parents, the child, the donor, and the extended family on the donor's side are, potentially, fluid and open. This raises questions for the parents and the donor about who 'counts' as family. Do the donor's parents become grandparents of the donor conceived child? Is the donor-conceived child a (half) sibling to the donor's other children? We found that each family had to negotiate where the boundaries lay and this could be both challenging and worrying. One mum who knew her egg donor, said:

She [the donor] is about 60 miles away. If she lived round the corner we'd have to work much more on that one. The clinic would have been asking us about that. I think they were quite pleased that there was this physical distance. We wouldn't have the children all at the same school saying, "Oh, we're brothers," and having to explain it all. So, that, I think it made things easier.

Wondering about donor 'siblings'

Many parents in our research wrestled with the thought that their child could be related to a large number of unknown children growing up in the same town or even neighbourhood. One mother said:

I find really, it's something just odd about donor siblings. Do you see what I mean? That whole element is so … I don't know, there's something... dark. There's something quite disturbing about it. That's one aspect that will always be unresolved …

Grandparents and wider family

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

Grandparents, especially grandmothers, were often a real source of support during the donor conception process. Grandparents did sometimes have misgivings about donor conception, in case it led to problems or complications in the future for their grandchild. In the main though, they were just overjoyed to be grandparents and wanted to treat their donor-conceived grandchild in exactly the same way as all their other grandchildren.

One grandmother said:

It's fine. 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.

Do genetic links matter?

Genetic connections play a very complex role in the families of donor conceived children and there is no easy answer to this question. The issue of genes and blood raised a range of often confused and confusing feelings. We found that family members 'claimed' the child as their own in different ways. For example, they could emphasise the importance of social relationships over genetic ones in forming family bonds. One mother who conceived a daughter using donor eggs explained it like this:

> *There isn't anybody else who's her mum. Because, it's the hours and hours and days and months and weeks and years of love and time and energy and, you know hard graft at times that you need to give to your child to raise it. To me it's become abundantly clear that that's what makes a mother and not the cell that starts it off. So I don't have any problems with the question "Who is [my daughter's] mum"? I'm hundred percent her mum but I'm not the only person that made her, so it's a funny one.*

But the genetic bond to the donor was not completely disregarded either. For example, some children looked very different from the rest of the family, or developed tastes or talents that appeared foreign. Moreover, little things, such as talk about family resemblances reminded parents and grandparents that they were not all genetically related.

> *Delia: And still even now sometimes people say things and there's the traditional comments of, "Oh, she's really starting to look like James now".*
>
> *James: Like yesterday."So much like your father."*
>
> *Delia: (laughter) And that sort of thing that you do struggle with...*
>
> *James: Which I don't mind, because she's quite pretty.*
>
> *Delia: (laughter) But you do struggle with comments like that.*

It seems that the 'stranger genes' were never forgotten, but continually present in the mind of parents and grandparents.

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.

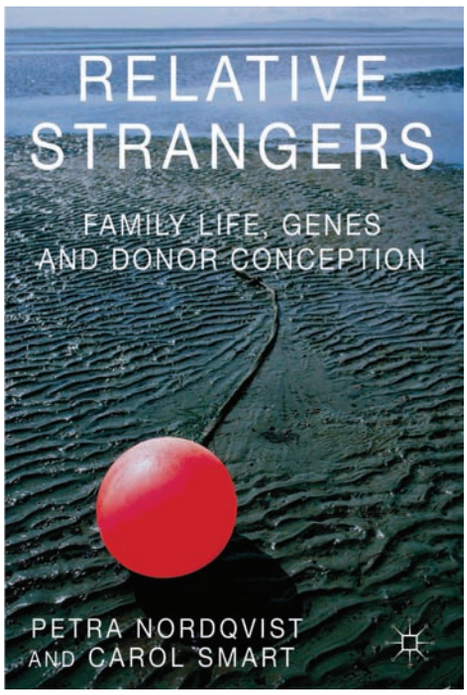
The project was carried out by Dr Petra Nordqvist and Professor Carol Smart from the Morgan Centre, University of Manchester. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

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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