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in focus

WORDS KATE BOURNE



family ties

If you're considering donor conception or have had babies via this method, donor counsellor Kate Bourne offers some sound advice on talking to children about their family background

Using a sperm, egg or embryo donor is becoming an increasingly common method to conceive a child. In the past 20 years, almost 500 children in Victoria have been conceived in this way. It is impossible to know exactly how many children have been conceived in Australia using donor gametes in the last 20 years, but it is likely to be in the realms of tens of thousands.

A generation ago, parents were often advised not to tell their children about how they were conceived. We now know this is not necessarily the best thing for the child. Secrets can fester within a family and can become a burden to keep. It may feel like lying to your child.

It is important for children to know their genetic history for their identity and for their medical history. It is crucial that they receive this information from you – their parent – and not from anyone else. Neither should they be in the position of guessing the information.

For many parents, finding the right words to explain how their donor-conceived children came to be can be quite daunting. Unfortunately this may mean you put off talking to your child and never get around to it. However, it is much less difficult than you might think and is actually easier to do when your child is younger.

There are now many resources available to help and support families through this process. In fact, talking to your child about donor conception is similar to how you teach any child about their conception.

It is never too early or too late to start. There is no “right” or “wrong” way. It is not a one-off talk but rather a lifelong conversation. It is more about parents finding their own words to explain their own particular story about how they became a family. When an opportunity arises, bring it into the conversation and repeat the information, and see if the child understands

and remembers what they have been told.

The most important thing is not the words that are used but that your child senses your love and pride in them and how they were conceived. If they sense you are embarrassed or ashamed, this may affect the way they feel about themselves and may mean they are less likely to want to ask questions or talk to you about it in the future. They also need to know that you couldn't love them any more even if your eggs/sperm could have been used. Their conception was certainly no accident. They can be very sure that they are a very wanted child. Also try not to make too much of a big deal about it, as it is only one facet of the unique individual they are. All children want to feel special but not too different from everyone else.

Most parents are naturally anxious about what they are going to say and how their child will react. You may not feel relaxed and comfortable as it means talking about painful issues from your infertility journey that you thought you had put to rest. You may mistakenly feel that your child may reject you when they discover they are not genetically connected to you.

It is often a good idea to seek support from a counsellor or from other parents who have used a donor to have a child (from services such as the Infertility Treatment Authority). There are also many good books for young children available to help parents and make telling a lot easier (see the resources section at the end of this story).

It may also be worthwhile to make your child their own baby book/life diary (or maybe it is a “baby box” if you can't fit it into a book!) about their own unique family story, including photos and mementos from their treatment, and information they have about their donor, baby ID bracelet, lock of hair and so forth. You and your child can add to it over the years.

Some families have some contact with their donor as the result of an application to the donor registers or have a personal connection with their donor. This may have begun as a thank-you letter to the donor and then continued as correspondence via letters or email; and some families and donors have arranged to meet.

Counselling is very much part of this process, and families and donors report a high level of satisfaction with the contact. It is, of course, entirely voluntary and only occurs if both parties agree to it. If families have had contact with their donor they may include letters and photos from their donor as a record for the child.

If you're wondering what you would say to your children, and at what stage you would talk about it, you may find it useful to follow this guide.

STARTING WITH BABIES

The overwhelming love you have for your baby and the gratitude you feel for being able to finally have a child is very strong. Please don't try to be a perfect parent. Being a parent is an enormous challenge for anyone – whether they have used a donor or not. Start telling your story as you feed, change or settle your baby. You may feel a little silly doing this, but remember it is giving you practice, and you can try different ways of putting your story into words until you feel more comfortable. It gives you a “trial run” so you can get over any anxiety you feel.

This is also a time when many people may be commenting on who the child resembles. This may feel uncomfortable. How will you respond? It is important to have some support as this may be the time the reality of using a donor impacts upon you. Consider sharing your situation with close family and friends whose support you are likely to need. The feedback I have received from parents who have confided in loved ones has been overwhelmingly positive. Their friends

and family are so pleased to see that they are parents at last, and have been understanding and supportive of their decision to use a donor.

WHAT TO DO WITH TODDLERS

Toddlers need only very simple information. You can begin by teaching body parts and showing them that there are different sorts of families and where babies come from. You can explain some babies are made from a mum and a dad, and that some other people need help from other adults called “donors” to make a baby. If your child is interested in books you can use the books

mummies like us to have babies. Your donor Dave gave some sperm so we could have you. The doctor put the sperm inside me and you started to grow.’ Or, if you have used a donor embryo, ‘Sometimes mummies and daddies need help from another mum and dad to have a baby.’

THE EARLY SCHOOL YEARS

School-age children are able to begin to understand the implications of being donor conceived. They may start to question what they inherited from their parents and how they are influenced by their donor. Does their donor have a good sense of humour or did they get this from Mum? Does their donor have curly hair or is that from Grandad? Sometimes learning about genetics at school or seeing something on television prompts more questions. You may also use these opportunities to raise the topic.

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suggested in our resources section at the end of this story. You may need to paraphrase them if you find your child is unable to concentrate on the story. If you know your donor’s first name, it makes their story more personal to use it if you feel comfortable to do so.

PREPARING PRESCHOOLERS

Kids of this age are able to understand more complex information. The children’s books I mentioned previously are perfect for this age group. Don’t be afraid to use the correct terms such as egg, sperm, embryo, donor. It is less confusing if you use the proper terms from the beginning.

Some examples of words you can use: ‘Mummy and Daddy wanted to have you for so long. They tried and tried but no baby came. All babies start from an egg from a woman and sperm from a man. We went to the doctor and the doctor said Mummy’s eggs didn’t work. A lady (called a donor) offered to give us some of her eggs to make you. We went to the hospital and the doctor collected the eggs from the lady, put them with Daddy’s sperm and put them inside Mummy.’ Or if you are single, ‘I really wanted to have you but I didn’t find the right man to be your dad. I went to the hospital and a very kind man gave some of his sperm to help you to be.’ Or if you are in a same-sex relationship, ‘We really, really wanted to have you so we went to the doctor and he said there was a way for

At this age kids may be interested in the mechanics of the treatment you went through to have them, for example, ‘How did they get the eggs out?’ and ‘How big were they?’ If frozen sperm or embryos were used, they may think they were stored in a standard refrigerator. Answer their questions simply and honestly and encourage more questions. Don’t forget to tell them about non-assisted reproduction as they may assume all babies are made the way they were and assume they will need the assistance of a donor if or when they want to have children.

TELLING TEENAGERS

If parents are telling their child for the first time at this age, the information is likely to come as a surprise to their child and they may well need time to absorb the news. It is also a time when children want to be just like everyone else and they may start to become self-conscious about perceiving themselves as different. Talking about reproduction may also be a little embarrassing for them, especially if puberty is starting and their body is changing. They may become more selective about who they confide in with this information, or “go underground”.

REACTIONS

The good news is that most parents find that talking to their child is far easier than they expected and a big relief once it is done. You may benefit from having a supportive friend, family

member or counsellor to talk things over with and “debrief”. The reality is that young children do not reject their parents and can understand this information far better than we expect them to. They love you and know you have been there from the beginning; that you love them, comfort them and play with them. If children are told early then it is completely “normal” for them. It also makes perfect sense to kids that, if you want to have a baby and can’t because your eggs and sperm aren’t working, you might ask somebody to help you.

Their response could surprise you as they may show little reaction, leaving you wondering if they’ve taken the information in; or conversely they could be quite curious. They may become quiet and need time to process the information.

If children are older it may come as a shock and they’ll need time to come to terms with what it means for them. It may be useful for your child to know that there are many, many children who are in the same situation. You may wish to attend a support group picnic where they can meet others conceived in the same way. They may also be very conscious of your reaction and need to hear that you wouldn’t want them any other way, and that you couldn’t love them any more even if your eggs/sperm had worked. They could also benefit from talking to a supportive friend, family member or counsellor if you have concerns.

DONOR CONTACT

Please don’t feel threatened if your child asks questions about their donor. This is only to be expected. You are probably very curious too if you haven’t met their donor before. Answer your child’s questions as honestly as you can. If you don’t know the answers, you may wish to make an application to the donor registers*.

Try not to be frightened of your donor. Remember they wanted you to have this child and are very clear that they are not in a parenting role. That is your job. They do not want to steal your child away from you. Under Victorian legislation, donors have no responsibilities or rights towards your child. They often have children of their own, and are usually very happy to assist you with information you may request. They often wonder how the child is, and whether they are happy and healthy. It usually gives them a great feeling of satisfaction to know the child is thriving and loved. Try not to refer to your donor as if he is a superman or wonder woman. Donors are ordinary people and your child may be disappointed when they discover the donor

is not the perfect person you have described.

Be proud of the way you have formed your family. Your children can know they were very much longed for and conceived with the generosity and goodwill of another person or couple who also wanted them to be born. Be honest with your kids, acknowledge their feelings, and be there for them. ●

* This applies to Victorian legislation. Different legislation currently applies to each state. If you live outside Victoria, please check with the relevant state or territory legislation.

RESOURCES

FURTHER READING

- *Sometimes It Takes Three To Make A Baby – Explaining Egg Donor Conception To Young Children* by Kate Bourne (Melbourne IVF, \$20).
- *Mommies, Daddies, Donors, Surrogates: Answering Tough Questions And Building Strong Families* by Diane Ehrensaft (Guildford Press, \$30).

USEFUL CONTACTS

- **bubhub.com.au** A comprehensive listing of information services and support groups.
- **dcnetwork.org** A great selection of research material and further reading including *My Story* – a children’s book explaining donor insemination, *Our Story* (a series of three children’s books dealing with donor conception in different family contexts) and *Talking And Telling* – age-specific booklets that are free to download.
- **dcsg.org.au** The Donor Conception Support Group has a great selection of reading including *Experiences Of Donor Conception: Parents, Offspring And Donors Through The Years* by Caroline Lorbach.
- **ita.org.au** The Infertility Treatment Authority site has many resources, including podcasts of parents talking about the way in which they talked to their kids. Call 03 8601 5250 for free confidential advice and support.
- **rainbowfamilies.org.au** A volunteer community organisation for same-sex parented families.