

# VARTA

Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority

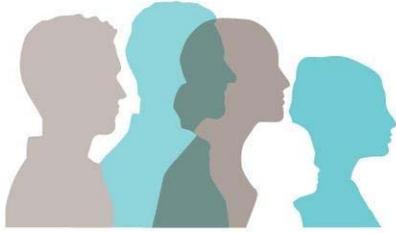
## **“This is how we became a Family” Talking to young children about Donor-conception**

Using a sperm, egg or embryo donor is becoming an increasingly common method to conceive a child. In the past 20 years, almost 4 500 children in Victoria have been conceived this way. 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 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 which 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 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 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.



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The Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority has many resources and links on its website: [www.varta.org.au](http://www.varta.org.au) to assist parents. Resources include several podcasts of parents talking about the way in which they talked to their kids and how they reacted. The Infertility Treatment Authority also offers free counselling to assist parents in talking to their children. You are welcome to phone (03) 8601 5250 for confidential advice and support or to come and speak face to face with an experienced counsellor if you prefer.

There are also many good books for young children available to help parents and make telling a lot easier. The wonderful children's books explaining sperm donation, 'My Story' and 'Our Story' are beautifully illustrated and have editions for heterosexual, lesbian and single parent families. 'Sometimes it Takes Three to Make a Baby' is a book I wrote for young children explaining egg donation. It also includes a life diary for the child to complete and one family's story.

I would encourage all families to make 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 and lock of hair etc. You and your child can add to it over the years.

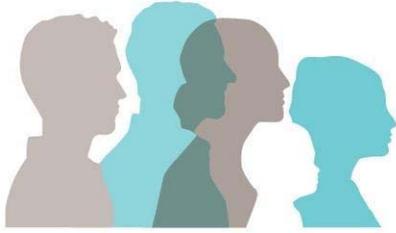
Some families have some contact with their donor as a result of making an application to the Donor Registers or if their donor is known to them. This may have begun as a thank you letter to the donor and then they may continue to correspond via letters or email; and some families and donors have arranged 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 to and from their donor as a record for the child.

**"But what would I actually say when?" .....**

- **When your child is a baby**

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 for you. How will you respond? You may wish to think



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about how you will reply. 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 very pleased to see they are parents at last. They have been very understanding and supportive of their decision to use a donor.

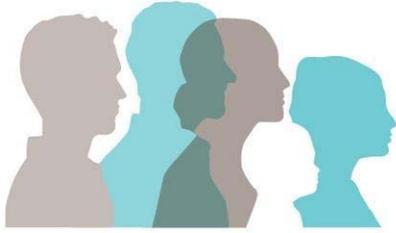
- **When your child is a toddler**

Toddlers need only very simple information. You can begin by teaching them 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 to make a baby and that they need to go to the hospital and may need help from other adults called 'donors'. If your child is interested in books you can use the books I have suggested above but perhaps 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.

- **Pre-school Years**

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 e.g. 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 (who is 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 egg donor, 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 mummies like us to have babies. Your donor, Dave gave some sperm so that 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."



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- **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 are they influenced from 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 grand dad? Sometimes learning about genetics at school or seeing something on television prompts more questions. You may also use these opportunities to raise the topic.

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?" "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/when they want to have children.

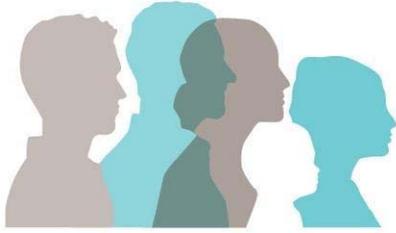
- **Later School Years**

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 the child is likely to need time to absorb the information. 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: 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 are able to 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 you can't because your eggs and sperm aren't working; to ask someone else who wants to help you.

Their response may surprise you as they may show little reaction and you may wonder if they have taken the information in; or conversely they may 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 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



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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 may 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 may also benefit from the opportunity to talk to a supportive friend, family member or counsellor if you have concerns.

Please don't be 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 your donor wanted you to have this child. They 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 the \*legislation they have no rights or responsibilities towards your child. They often have children of their own. They 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 well 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 good will 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.

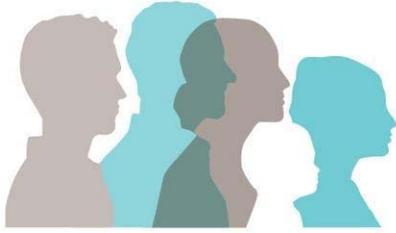
## Resources

### Books for Children

"Sometimes it Takes Three to Make a Baby- Explaining egg donor conception to young children.", Kate Bourne. Melbourne IVF 2002 [www.mivf.com.au](http://www.mivf.com.au)

"My Story", Infertility Trust 1999 Childrens book explaining donor insemination, [www.dcnetwork.org](http://www.dcnetwork.org)

"Our Story" Donor Conception Network 2002 Series of 3 children's books dealing with donor conception in different family contexts [www.dcnetwork.org](http://www.dcnetwork.org)



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## **For Parents**

[www.varta.org.au](http://www.varta.org.au) "Telling" section with articles and podcasts

Free counselling also available Ph (03) 8601 5250

"Talking and Telling" Booklets for age groups 0-7 yrs, 8-11yrs, 12-16 yrs, & 17+yrs available to download [www.dcnetwork.org](http://www.dcnetwork.org)

"Experiences of Donor Conception: Parents, Offspring and Donors through the Years, Caroline Lorbach, Jessica Kingsley Publications 2003 [www.dcsq.org.au](http://www.dcsq.org.au)

"Mummies, Daddies, Donors and Surrogates: Answering Tough Questions and Building Strong Families", Diane Ehrensaft, Guildford Press 2005

## **Support Groups**

Donor Conception Support Group [www.dcsq.org.au](http://www.dcsq.org.au)

Rainbow Families [www.rainbowfamilies.org.au](http://www.rainbowfamilies.org.au) for same-sex parented families