

# Donor conception

(telling your child)

ParentLink

## ADULT ISSUES

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

The use of science and medicine to help make a baby, called **reproductive technology**, may be the only way some people can have a child. This may mean using gametes (eggs or sperm) or embryos, given or donated, by someone else. Not being able to make a baby naturally is common and happens to about one in seven couples. Babies born as a result of this technology are very much wanted and many happy families have been formed in this way.

In the past parents were often advised not to tell their children or their family and friends about this. We now know that this is not necessarily the best for a child in the long run, and that people have a right to know how they were created and about the qualities that have been passed down to them by their parents.

Many people concerned with the best interests of children, and many adults who were born from donated tissue are leading the way to change the law, so that in the future all children can find information about their origins.

## What are the words used?

- **Conceive:** to start a baby
- **Donor:** a person who gives sperm, eggs or embryos to someone else
- **DI (Donor Insemination):** donated sperm is introduced into the vagina to help someone have a baby
- **Embryo:** is a fertilised egg in early cellular stage
- **Gamete:** sperm or egg
- **Genes:** qualities passed on from parent to child
- **Genetic history:** history or pattern of qualities passed on through families
- **Infertility:** not able to have a baby
- **Insemination:** in vitro fertilisation brings together sperm and egg outside of the body to cause pregnancy
- **Reproductive technology:** the use of science and medicine to make a baby

## Parents' feelings

You will have gone through the roller coaster of emotions that not being able to have a baby brings. You may have been through a time of immense grief, anger, sadness and loss. You will have had to face not being able to have a child naturally and then deciding upon and going through the process of having a baby with the help of science and medicine. You will have had to come to terms with having a child that is not genetically both 'yours'.

You may not have told anyone about the help you needed to start your baby. Your child's grandparents, uncles, aunts and friends may not know. One of you may have children from a previous marriage or relationship who will be affected. It is not easy, and you may have fears that talking about this will harm your relationship with your child. You may find that, on the other hand, not talking about it becomes a burden.

Surveys have shown that most people approve of, and support the use of donors to help make families.

Dealing with your own feelings and the reactions of others is not easy. Many parents are now facing this very difficult situation.

You may need support, and your child may need support. However, your child's history should not be kept secret from him or her.

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# Why telling is important

## The right to know your history

It is understandable that you may fear that telling will cause problems within your family. It may help if you think about everyone's right to know where they came from and their genetic history and also to think about what it would mean to live in a family with secrets.

- Who we are is partly what we have inherited—it is the beginning of our life story.
- Knowing our history helps us to understand who we are.
- You may believe that keeping this secret is in the interests of your child because it will protect her from being teased or talked about. However, the experience of adults who were born from donated tissue tells us that it is not so much the learning about the truth but it is the way in which the information is given or discovered that can cause problems.
- It is important to consider whether you are prepared to take the risk of your child:
  - being told by somebody else
  - accidentally finding out
  - becoming suspicious and going to one of the reproductive medicine clinics when she reaches 16 years and is able to find out.
- Being told when she is older may damage her self-esteem.

Any of these may lead to your child's sense of betrayal and a loss of trust in the people she believed in.

## Medical reasons

- We all have certain diseases in our family history, such as bowel cancer and breast cancer. Some health problems are passed on from parent to child in genes. If we know our history we can help to either prevent diseases developing or get an early diagnosis and treatment.
- Donors are asked to record the diseases in their families and this information is available from the clinics for your child.
- DNA testing and blood group testing is becoming more common. Such tests can show that two people may be or may not be related. This is how some people have found out their genetic history. Being given such important and personal information in this way can seriously damage a sense of trust and the family relationships.
- There is a small but real risk that when your child becomes an adult he will meet, fall in love and have sex with a half-sister. If both know their origins they could check on whether they were related before this happened.

## Family relationships

- Secrets are hard to keep for long—the idea of a lifelong secret can be quite frightening and a great burden.
- Being secretive may make others, especially your child, feel that you are ashamed. Not being able to have a baby in the natural way is nothing to feel ashamed about.
- Secrets in families can damage trust and make people in the family feel insecure.

**Children need honest answers given in a simple way to suit their age and level of understanding.**

## When and how to tell

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When and how your child is told or finds out are most important. Hearing the information from you will help you and your child to have the same understanding of the facts.

### When:

- Children should grow up with this knowledge rather than be told in a way that makes it seem unusual. From a very early age it can be woven into your child's understanding of who she is—even if you feel she is too young to understand.
- When your child starts to enjoy hearing stories she will be interested in her own 'story' and that may be a good time to start.

### How:

- Your child should be told by you rather than be left to guess or hear it from someone else.
- Practise what you plan to tell your child. You might find it helpful to read a book on how to tell your child, or you could talk this over with a counsellor.
- Remember, you as parents know your child best. You know the most about your child and how to say things in a way he'll understand. You don't have to use big words if your child won't understand them, even if they are the technical words that doctors might use.
- Start by telling your child early, even if you think she or he is too young to understand. Bring it into conversation from time to time and repeat the information over time. You might like to start talking about where babies come from. You could explain how some babies are made with a mother and father, and how some babies are made with the help of science, medicine and other adults.
- Some parents have found it helpful, especially for younger children, to tell it like a story. You might make your own storybook. As your child grows and understands more, encourage her to add more pages and details to her storybook.
- Don't make it sound like a big secret. It is not all that unusual!
- Let your child know how you feel, for example, how happy you are about it.
- Stress that all children are special and tell your child that there are lots of different ways that families are formed, for example, adoption and stepfamilies.

## How will my child respond?

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The age and maturity of your child and the way you give the information will make a difference. Be prepared for reactions that you may not be expecting.

Your child may:

- not be at all interested
- be curious about how it all happened
- tell you that she thought something was different all along because no one talked about her having 'mum's eye colour' or 'dad's nose' for example
- be watching to see how you feel about it
- be anxious to offer you reassurance that it doesn't affect how much she loves you
- be confused or sad in the beginning
- need time to think about it
- want to know who else knows
- ask what to say to others, for example, friends, schoolmates or family members.

## When your child wants to know more

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Children are naturally curious and may have many questions. They can ask them in a direct way that can often embarrass adults. They may want to know the fine details of why and a description of how it happened. They may ask the same questions more than once. Children need honest answers given in a simple way to suit their age and level of understanding.

- It may help your child to know about other children in the same situation. (Counsellors in this area may help you here.)
- As children get older they are more likely to want to explore and find out more information.
- In most cases there will be non-identifying information about the donor that you can ask for. Sometimes the donor may be contacted to provide more details.
- Some donors have moved without leaving a forwarding address and so there may be little information. Prepare your child for this.
- The reproductive medicine clinics have counsellors who can help. This is a free service to you and your child (and other family members if needed).

Remember if your child wants to know more about the donor, it does not mean that you are being rejected. It's about him wanting to know more about who he is.

## Telling family and friends

- All families are different and you may want to talk to a counsellor about how to tell those who are close to you.
- Choose people who will be supportive when told and who can provide support if you need it.
- You may need to think in advance about how best to handle people's different reactions.
- If you have told a family member or friend, and not your child, the information may come out by mistake.

## Books for parents

*Building a family with the assistance of donor insemination*, Ken Daniels, Dunmore Press, 2004.

*Choosing to be open about donor conception*, Sharon Pettle and Jan Burns, booklet for parents available through Donor Conception Network, UK.

*Experiences of donor conception: parents, offspring and donors through the years*, Caroline Lorbach, Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2003.

*Families following assisted conception—what do we tell our child?*, Alexandra M. McWhinnie, University of Dundee, 1997.

*Having your baby by donor insemination*, Elizabeth Noble, 1987.

*Having your baby through egg donation*, Ellen Glazer and Evelina Sterling, Perspectives Press, 2005.

## Books for parents *continued*

*How babies and families are really made*, Patricia Schaffer, Tabor Sarah Books, California. Available through Amazon Books.

*How i began: the story of Di*, Infertility Social Workers Group NSW, 1988.

*Let me explain: a story about donor insemination*, Jane Schnitter, Perspectives Press, 1995, suitable for primary school-aged children.

*Let the offspring speak: discussions on donor conception*, Donor Conception Support Group of Australia Inc., 1997.

*Mummies, daddies, donors, surrogates: answering tough questions and building strong families*, D Ehrensaff, The Guildford Press, 2005.

*My story*, Infertility Research Trust, 1991, children's book about donor insemination.

*Our story*, Donor Conception Network UK, 2002, series of three children's books dealing with donor conception in different family contexts.

*Sometimes it takes three to make a baby*, Kate Bourne, Melbourne IVF, 2002.

*Telling and talking*, Donor Conception Network UK, 2006, series of four booklets for parents covering age groups birth–7 years, 8–11 years, 12–16 years, 17+ years.

*The gift of a child*, Robert and Elizabeth Snowdon, 1986

*Where did i really come from?* Narelle Wickham, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992.

## Reminders

- Infertility is common—it happens to one in seven couples.
- It is best for your children to know of their origins.
- It is helpful for health reasons to know about your genetic history.
- There is now an increasing emphasis upon seeking donors who will let their identity be known.
- Secrets in families can damage trust and relationships.
- Tell your child even if he is too young to fully understand.
- Be prepared to answer more questions as your child grows older.
- There is a range of support and help for individuals, couples and groups.

## Contacts

<b>Donor Conception Support Group</b>	Business hours	02 9793 9335
<b>Sydney IVF (Canberra)</b>	Business hours	6260 3400

## Websites

<a href="http://www.access.org.au">www.access.org.au</a>	Australia's national infertility network (ACCESS)
<a href="http://www.cyh.com">www.cyh.com</a>	Parenting and child health information
<a href="http://www.dcsq.org.au">www.dcsq.org.au</a>	Donor Conception Support Group
<a href="http://www.legislation.act.gov.au">www.legislation.act.gov.au</a>	ACT Legislation Parentage ACT 2004
<a href="http://www.sydneyivf.com">www.sydneyivf.com</a>	Sydney IVF Clinics NSW and ACT

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