

EGG DONATION CHILDREN: WHETHER, HOW AND WHEN TO TELL THE CHILDREN

Introduction

Egg donation is rarely straightforward. First you have to come to terms with the fact that, often due to a premature menopause, you will not be able to bear your own biological children. Next you have to find a suitable donor, which may mean sitting on a hospital waiting list for two years. Then there are all the issues surrounding egg donation itself, chief of which is whether or not you should tell any potential child. Luckily, there are plenty of counsellors and support groups to help you think through the questions and dilemmas that arise. The main national organisation is the Donor Conception Network, which holds regular meetings and publishes a newsletter twice a year. Although some estimates suggest that only 30% of children conceived through egg and sperm donation are aware of their origins, the climate of opinion is currently undergoing a sea of change.

Change in the Law

In spring 2005 the law changed, this meant children born as the result of donated gametes will be able to find out the identity of their donor. This will only apply to children born after that time. It is not retroactive.

How the situation has changed

Before 1st April 2005 the regulations governing people donating sperm, eggs or embryos meant that they were anonymous. Following the Department of Health announcement in January 2004, a change in the law was planned which meant that children born as a result of sperm, eggs or embryos donated after April 2005 would be able to access the identity of their donor when they reach the age of 18. It has been calculated that the first 18year olds able to do this will be in 2023.

How this affects existing donors

The new regulations surrounding information on donors will not be retrospective. Anybody donating before April 2005 will remain anonymous, unless the Donor themselves removes anonymity.

Why donor anonymity has been removed

Many people believe that children born from donated sperm, eggs or embryos should be able to have access to information about their genetic origins. The HFEA supports the removal of donor anonymity.

The affect on the future availability of donors

It is acknowledged that ending donor anonymity does involve some risk to the future availability of donors. However, the HFEA does not feel that this practical consideration should outweigh the more fundamental principle that donor offspring should have to knowledge of their genetic origins.

In 1985 Sweden changed its laws to allow all donor insemination offspring the right to obtain identifying information about the donor. Evidence shows that although there was an initial reduction in donors in Sweden, the number of donors coming forward returned to normal levels.

History

Under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology (1990) Act, the HFEA was required to set up and maintain a register of information about donors. The purpose of this register, set up in 1991, was to keep a record of all donors, licensed treatments and children born as a result of donated sperm, eggs or embryos. Under these regulations, when those children reach 18 they may ask the HFEA to confirm that they were born as a result of donated sperm, eggs or embryos. Those intending to marry, including those who plan to do so before their 18th birthday, may also ask whether the HFEA Register shows that they are related to the person they intend to marry. In December 2001 the Department of Health published a consultation on the provision of information to people born as a result of sperm, egg or embryo donation.

The HFEA responding to this consultation saying that it supported a move towards the removal of donor anonymity as long as any change was not retrospective.

Should you tell the child?

Not that long ago would-be egg donation parents were often told by clinics or GPs that, if treatment was successful, it would be best to forget all about the unconventionality of their children's conception.

Today the advice generally offered by counsellors and clinics is that honesty is the best policy and that children have the right to be told as much as is known about how they were conceived and their genetic parentage. Up to April 2005, the only information available to parents is a list of such non-identifying characteristics as hair colour, eye colour, height, etc (although the donor may choose to supply further details such as hobbies and occupation). With the change in the law in 2005 children are now able to discover the identity of their donor once they are over 18 (16 if marrying), but they will only know to approach the register if they have been told about their donor conception or if they have suspicions about their genetic origins.

Obviously, deciding whether or not to tell your child is a hugely personal choice. There may be cultural difficulties over telling or perhaps you are not finding it easy to come to terms with donation and the issues it raises about your fertility. Some mothers fear that their children will turn against them later in life and reject them as not being 'my real mother'. The possibility that teenagers will want to trace their blood relatives and perhaps favour them rather than the family in which they've grown up is also a daunting prospect, causing many parents to hesitate. However, the research that has been done to date (mainly amongst donor insemination children) does suggest that the negative consequences of openness are far outweighed by the positive. The general agreement is that children thrive in a happy, loving, secure home environment and this is far more important than their genetic origins.

For many parents, the decision has already been made for them as they've told other members of their families and their friends. Worried that their child might find out the information inadvertently, through a casual remark or a careless joke, they judge it best to handle the disclosure of the facts themselves while the child is still young. There is a real danger that, should the moment be postponed and the child discover the truth accidentally in adolescence or adulthood, the precious trust built up over time between parents and child could be seriously undermined or even destroyed. As a DC Network publication puts it, 'Such a revelation, particularly when unplanned and unprepared for, can have an enormous impact and lasting repercussions.'

Other parents regard telling as a positive move from the beginning. Believing that being open with their children is treating them with respect as individuals, they are keen to pursue a philosophy of openness and see telling as an essential starting point in a relationship of trust.

One of the most important points to remember is that a child who has always known about being an egg donation baby will grow up familiar with the concept and unaware that it's at all unusual. They may even feel slightly special, particularly if the parents explain how much they were wanted and how incredibly kind the egg donor was. Like so many personal issues, egg donation is a far bigger concern for the parents than it is for the rest of the world.

How do you tell your child?

One of the major stumbling blocks people come across in talking to their children about egg donation is how to put it into words. How do you explain a complicated medical procedure to a child who is confronted by new and amazing things every day and is anyway far more interested in climbing frames and chocolate than in being told where he/she came from? How do you introduce words like 'sperm' to a toddler? Do you actually need to?

Many find the DC Network publication, 'Our Story', useful. Written specifically to be read to children conceived as the result of egg donation, 'Our Story' provides very simple explanations about female infertility, eggs and donors. It includes a space at the back for the child's own picture so that they can feel themselves to be very much part of their own story. Other parents prefer to use their own words and to tailor them to the individual, perhaps using a basic outline such as, 'Daddy gave Mummy the seed, a kind lady gave Mummy the egg and Mummy had a nice, warm place to put it.' You'll probably find that how you express the situation changes over time, becoming more technical as the child's curiosity grows and their understanding develops.

When do you tell your child?

The general feeling seems to be that telling your child is not a one-off event but a process that will continue for several years and will almost certainly involve lots of questions and ongoing discussion. Some recommend 'practising' when the child is still a baby, maybe trying out certain words or phrases when you're changing their nappy or enjoying time alone together. In this way you get to feel more comfortable with the story and less anxious about going through it when the child is old enough to take it all in. Others feel that the right time to start bringing the subject up is when issues about babies and families arise naturally and children want to know more. The danger with leaving it until later is that the issue can simply become forgotten or broaching it can grow to seem more and more daunting. Yet there is probably no such thing as the 'right' moment.

It's up to you to judge what suits you and your child and to remember that the questions they ask will always surprise you!

Useful Addresses.

Donor Conception Network

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Tel: 020 7278 2608
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www.dcnetwork.org

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

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103-105 Bunhill Row
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WC1B 3HF
Tel: 020 7291 8200 Fax: 020 7291 8201
[Email: admin@hfea.gov.uk](mailto:admin@hfea.gov.uk)
www.hfea.gov.uk

Useful Books.

These are some of the publications that are available from the DC Network.

TELLING AND TALKING MATERIALS are four booklets and a film. The booklets are written by a parent of donor conceived young people and based on children's developmental stages, the booklets provide parents with a source of emotional support and practical guidance in finding the right time and the right language to 'tell' and continue conversations with their children over the years.

There are separate booklets for parents of children at different stages.

Many issues are addressed in both the booklets and the film, which includes families who have used anonymous and known egg donation, anonymous sperm donation and double (egg and sperm) donation. Two single women, one lesbian couple and seven heterosexual couples are featured.

The four booklets are now available to download **free** at www.dcnetwork.org.uk

'Families Following Assisted Conception': What do we Tell our Child?' by Alexina McWhinnie (University of Dundee Department of Social Work, 1996).

'Let the Offspring Speak': Discussions on Donor Conception' (Donor Conception Support Group of Australia, 1997)

'Choosing to be Open about Donor Conception': The Experiences of Parents' by Sharon Pettle and Jan Burns

'Our Story: Egg Donation': A simple and friendly way to begin to talk to young children about their conception through egg donation.

'Experiences of Donor Conception: Parents, Offspring and Donors through the years' by Caroline Lorbach. Publisher Jessica Kingsley ISBN 1 84310 122X
Australian mother of three DI children, Caroline Lorbach draws on the experiences of parents, offspring and donors in this thought-provoking exploration of donor conception (eggs and sperm) through the eyes of all the stakeholders. She takes us step by step through the process of deciding to use donor conception, choosing a donor, pregnancy and birth, sharing the information with others, deciding to tell, telling, after the telling and discussions, thoughts and experiences with donor offspring. In all these categories she includes the experiences of single and lesbian women alongside those of heterosexual couples.