

DONOR DISCLOSURE: WHEN TELLING THE TRUTH TO YOUR CHILD ISN'T EASY, AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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“YOU'RE NOT MY 'REAL' PARENT ANYWAY”

Olivia Montuschi, parenting counselor and mother of two donor-conceived adults, offered these insights for the U.K.-based Donor Conception Network she co-founded, excerpted here by permission.

Babies and young children love and make strong emotional bonds with the people who on a daily basis love and take care of them. By the time children are 7 or 8, there is a strong emotional connection that is reinforced by everyday family life. Children who are securely attached are easily able to separate donor and parent in their minds.

The stage that is dreaded by most parents is adolescence. It is not surprising that some donor-conceived young people will challenge their non-genetic parent's authority as a 'real' parent. It is part of a normal range of behaviours at this stage. What matters is how parents respond to this.

This means neither becoming angry nor crumbling with hurt if your offspring challenges your authority as a parent. It means staying calm and responding according to the context.

Good parenting does not and should not prevent normal curiosity and interest in genetic inheritance, but if they have been brought up in openness—with honesty, trust, respect and love—it is highly unlikely that your child will ever think of their donor as a mother or father.

Similar to adoption, the donor industry has seen a major transformation about mental health aspects of this choice. As clinical psychologist Diane Ehrensaft wrote in her 2005 book “Mommies, Daddies, Donors, Surrogates”: “Twenty years ago people thought disclosure would be traumatic for the child, humiliating to the parent, and disruptive of the parent-child bond. Now it is believed to be a violation of the child's rights, a denial of reality, and a threat to the integrity of the family not to tell a child the truth about his or her birth history.”

However, that doesn't make telling easier for many couples. This guide is one in a series designed to help take the shame, secrecy and fear out of talking to your child.

WHY PARENTS DON'T TELL

The prevailing wisdom from research is that more than half—and perhaps closer to 80 percent—of children conceived by donor sperm or egg don't know that one (and sometimes both) parents are not biologically related to them. When you consider that about one million people walking around today were donor conceived, that's a lot of uninformed genetic history.

Reasons for non-disclosure are complex and emotional, but often relate to:

1. The non-biological parent doesn't want others to know about infertility, or feels threatened about being perceived as less of a parent to the child;
2. The extended family includes members who believe that only biology counts, and would be disapproving or make hurtful comments to the child;
3. A belief that donated gamete is “just a cell,” not comparable to nurturing and raising the child, so how the embryo started is inconsequential -- and it is presumed that the child would feel the same, so why bother telling?;
4. Having an anonymous donor leads to unanswerable, plaguing questions, so the child will have greater peace of mind not knowing;
5. Telling cannot be undone; if at some point it becomes important to disclose it can be done at that time;
6. If the shoe was on their foot, and the parent learned about being donor-conceived, it would have hurt their relationship with a non-biological parent, and thus was something best left unsaid;
7. There are full biological children already and the donor-conceived child would feel, or be made to feel, out of place.

In many cases, parents disagree with each other on whether to disclose, but the non-biological parents' wishes are generally deferred to—at least until death, divorce or a heated argument changes the dynamic.

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IN THEIR WORDS...

Barry Stevens, a Toronto-based filmmaker, learned after his father died that he and his sister were donor conceived. Now, more than 20 years later, he says he knows parents think they are sparing their children by keeping the truth from them.

“The issue of disclosure is often framed as a question of whether or not it’s good for the offspring. But I don’t think it’s anyone’s concern but mine whether the truth hurts or helps. It’s a question of rights. Nobody has the right to withhold key information about my origins from me,” he says. “The saddest thing for me is that so many parents insist on secrecy because they fear that if their children knows, they won’t love them. I suspect that was true of my father. But that’s so unfounded. Children love the people who nurture them.”

Harvard Law student Rebecca Hamilton was told by her parents from the start. “They were ahead of their time in ignoring the doctor’s advice to ‘go home, make love, and pretend it’s your own child.’ They did everything right by me in dealing with the donor conception issue. Their honesty with me enabled us to have a wonderful relationship. I always knew that Dad wasn’t my biological father, just as he knew I wasn’t his biological daughter. Our relationship was special to me— it wasn’t biological connection that was our foundation. He simply loved me for being my own little human being, and I revelled in being daddy’s little girl.”

WHY TELLING (AND EARLY) IS IMPORTANT

Children tend to sense family secrets. It is very difficult to hide nuances from the sensitivities of a child. A look exchanged between parents when someone unknowingly says, “He has your eyes,” will register. When the first in a series of family history medical forms comes home for sports camp, tension between parents about being misleading will be noticed. Many donor-conceived children who were told the truth later in life report feeling both betrayed about being misled, and relieved at having an explanation (other than an affair) for a sense of disconnection and shame.

Quite often, parents intend to tell, but put it off—making it even harder to bring it up as the child enters school and teenage years.

If telling is difficult, ask yourself these questions:

1. If a parent is ashamed about infertility, how will that underlying sense of shame be hidden from the child?
2. If genetics is viewed as such an essential aspect of parenting that a non-biological connection is seen as harmful for the parent-child bond, will the parents be able to disguise that bias?
3. If it is unimportant how the child was created, since the raising is the crucial definition of a parent, then why keep it a secret?

Essentially, telling and not telling often comes down to a question of whether one or both parents are ashamed or afraid of something. Not addressing the larger issues of the parent’s emotions doesn’t do the child any favors.

Every parent wants their child to grow up proud and confident about who they are. It is much easier to do that when a child feels special about the way he came into the world, and if he or she knows that both parents love him fully and honestly, no matter what.

For More Information:

“Telling and Talking” is an excellent series for parents about how to tell their children, written with different scripts for parents whose children are aged 0-7, 8-11, 12-16, and 17 and older. It is available for free from U.K.-based Donor Conception Network, at www.dcnetwork.org

*This report was prepared for Donor Sibling Registry
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