

Talking to Children about Donor Conception

Why Children have a right to know their genetic origins and need this information to understand their identity as they grow up.

Taking an open approach to information sharing about their donor conception:

1 **Helps** children understand their nature and nurture. While both are important, and nurture influences nature, one cannot deny the importance of genetics to physical and mental health, personality traits, interests, and tendencies.

2 **Provides** children with a context for the differences they observe between themselves, their parents, and any siblings.

3 **Provides** a true medical history (or lack of it), which can be given to doctors, making diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions more accurate. It also removes anxiety about the inheritance of disorders from the non-genetic parent.

4 **Models** honesty as a family value.

- Giving children truthful information about their background promotes close and trusting relationships, and opens the door to being the go-to person/people for children to explore their curiosity.
- Children that know the truth have not been known to reject their non-genetic parent. Day-to-day, year-to-year-relationships are bonding.

For parents who feel sharing the truth of their child's donor origins could cause difficulties for their child and/or family:

There are situations that may warrant a more private approach to the disclosure process, taking into account specific cultural, religious or health circumstances.

Some cultures and religions place a premium on genetic ties and may shun members of the family who do not share these connections, and may even prevent them from inheritance.

Similarly, there are families who prioritize the "blood line" and would treat non-"blood related" offspring differently than cousins and other relatives who share their genes.

For children who have developmental delays or challenges, special needs or are struggling with physical

or mental health issues, the donor conversation may add a level of complication that is better delayed or eliminated, depending on their prognosis.

It is important to remember in all of these cases: children may still find out the truth, even if access to the information has been controlled as much as possible. When this happens, follow guidelines below. Explain your reasoning for keeping this information from them, apologize for letting them down if that's how they feel, and express a willingness to be open to their questions and curiosity now.

For more detailed information, see Jana Rupnow's book *Three Makes Baby*.

Basic Facts

1 Talking to children about their donor conception is a process **not a one-time event**.

2 **Early telling** is easiest for parents and children.

- Gives parents a chance to practice telling the story and dealing with their own emotions about the donor conception choice, while the baby is not really understanding the words and is simply enjoying the interaction.
- Lays the foundation for future conversations.
- Telling early (and often) allows children to accept their story without shock or distress; to learn about aspects of their history, and more organically integrate this knowledge as they grow up and develop their sense of identity.
- Essentially they will 'always know' rather than having their understanding of who they are rocked at a later age.

3 **Typical reactions** to early disclosure: What matters most to young children is that they have a loving and secure relationship with their parents. This is what helps them feel good about themselves. Young children do not care about genetic connections so when they hear about 'Mommy not having enough eggs so she needed some help from another lady' or 'Daddy's sperm not being able to swim fast enough to reach Mommy's egg', your child's response may be indifference, to ask if they can have ice cream or to ask what a sperm looks like.

4 Parents **need to initiate conversations** with children about their donor conception, and not wait for them to bring it up because children will have no reason to broach the subject.

- Parent's will want to check in with them at various times over the course of their development. As they grow, they may have additional concerns, and parents can add to the story with developmentally appropriate material.
- Just because a child "seems fine" does not mean they don't have questions and feelings about being DC. Many parents want to assume that if the child does not talk about it or ask questions that the child is not thinking about it. This might be true, but it might be that the child senses that the topic is uncomfortable for the parent, so they keep their thoughts and questions to themselves.
- Children often do not know how to put all of their feelings and questions into words.
- It is the parent's job to raise the subject and ask for questions.

5 Genes are important to parents. They will be **important to children**, too.

- Children will need help understanding that 50% of their genes are from the gametes of another man or woman, or both in the case of double donation.
- A child's natural curiosity about his or her own genes should be encouraged.
- Remember, especially in the age of easily accessible DNA tests, it is much better to have open communication with children and teens about their origins rather than finding out they have pursued these tests on their own.

6 There is no reason to believe that your child will reject their non-genetic parent. Day to day, intimate relationships create **deep emotional bonds** between you and your child. Talking about complex topics builds intimacy in parent-child relationships; and your child's self-esteem.

7 Children are looking to **understand themselves**; they are not searching for other parents.

8 You want very much to be the Real Parent. You can be that. **Real Parents tell the truth.**

HOW to TALK to children, tweens, & teens about their Donor Conception

What follows is a beginning schema of issues to think about when planning a discussion with children at different ages and stages of a child's development. More in-depth information about the developmental stages can be found in books and articles. The original narrative never changes and parents can add to it in age-appropriate ways as children grow and develop cognitively and emotionally.

infancy to age 2



This is a time for parents to practice and get comfortable telling the family story. Some parents find they get emotional and appreciate working this through before their child picks up on this.



age 2 to 5

Even the youngest children can be told the basic story that some parents need help to have a baby and "we needed help from a man/woman to get the baby started" and "that baby was you!" While they will not really understand the content, they will 'always know' and pick up their parents' openness and love. In addition, Books like *The Family Book* by Todd Parr can introduce the youngest children to the concept that there are all kinds of families who are alike and different in a variety of ways, but the important thing is all families share affection and take care of each other.

age 4 to 6 Basics

Parents can use their own story or start with a book like the *What Makes a Baby* by Cory Silverberg.

- The book explains: It takes a sperm, an egg and a place to grow to create a baby.
- From here you can jump off to tell your child's own family story. We/I needed to get an egg or sperm from another person.
- The book makes clear that the sperm and eggs bring stories from the body they came from that influence who the baby is. This is a good foundation for future talk about genetics and preferable to books about donor conception that tend to talk about "the kind donor."



- Referring to the donor as "kind" is not recommended since your child may seek out the "donor" and will have his/her own experience with this person.

age 5 to 10 Beginning Conversations

- This age range may be a time to start filling in some of the details about how "you wanted a baby but it turned out you needed a doctor to help because mommy or daddy's egg/sperm (and/or uterus if using a surrogate) wasn't working quite right and (if they don't already know) it takes an egg from a woman and a sperm from a man to make a baby.
- Alternatively, your story might be that "we only have daddies/mommies in our family, so we needed help from a woman/man to start a baby," or "in our family it's just you and me so we needed help from a man/woman."
- You'll want to include the idea that your child has characteristics from someone other than a parent (such as mommy, daddy and the donor, etc.).
- Keep in mind, at this age it's best to underplay the medical details and infertility aspect of the story, as children are easily worried about the health of their parents.



age 11 to 13 Continuing the Dialogue

- Most important is that parents have created a safe and open atmosphere for family discussion about donor conception.
- The donor may or may not start to become more of a focus at this age and parents should think about which details about the donor they are ready to share, as information about what could have been inherited is very useful to the child's developing sense of identity.
- Children may be curious (at this age or in the future) about whether their parents met their donor, what parts of themselves come from this person, and what would motivate someone to be a donor.
- If the child's donor is someone known to the family, who is in the child's life, this might be a time when child and donor have a talk together. It is important for the parent to remember now and always, that their child's curiosity is not a sign of rejection but is a way to make sense of their own identity.

age 14 to 18 Identity

- Children of this age will be able to understand more about their parents' own family building experience. They may want to know how a single parent decided to become a mother or father on their own, how a same sex couple came together and chose a donor, or what the infertility process was like.
- They may be more curious about their genetic ties to the donor and/or half siblings, and some children will want to explore the possibility of meeting these people. They may also scrutinize more carefully the brothers and sisters they've grown up with, whether genetically related, half related or not, in terms of similarities and differences of all their attributes.
- Tweens or teens may be curious about the donor their parents chose and take an at-home DNA test, or if parents have used an Open-ID-Donor, the teen may exercise their right to contact the donor.
- Optimally, parents will let their offspring know they are supportive of the curiosity about their identity. Some will form relationships with donors or half-siblings. Again, this is part of self-development, and when parents are supportive and relationships are strong, family bonds are not threatened.
- Don't get thrown by the "Can we meet" question. Many kids will ask at some point if they can meet

the donor(s). This does not mean they are looking to replace their parents; it likely means they are curious.

Answer the question honestly. If parents have identifying information or an Open ID at 18 Donor

arrangement, the answer is likely yes. When parents do not have identifying information, the answer is maybe, and possibly complicated by not having identifying information and/or the donor's wish for anonymity. Parents can assure their child that if it is still very important to them in the future, they will help them in any way they can.

- Some donor conceived persons are curious and others are not. Some become curious when there is a relevant life event such as the birth of their own child, or a health concern.
- The parents' goal is to create an open and accepting environment for the child to explore who they are – a gift to any child no matter how they came to be. And with this foundation you can expect the dialogues to continue – as needed.



When to seek counseling from a therapist specializing in Donor Conception:

- If your child is 5 years old (or older) and you have not told your child of their donor origins
- If you are having difficulty telling or talking with your child, tween or teen about the donor conception
- If you are unclear about what are age-appropriate topics and questions to raise with your child
- If you and your partner are not on the same page about this
- If your child has concerns that you would like help understanding or addressing.

Talk to donor-conceived people if you are raising one.
Learn from their experience to benefit your child.



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Right to Know advances our fundamental human right to know our genetic identity through education, mental health initiatives, and advocacy. info@RightToKnow.us

Talking to OLDER children for the first time about their Donor Conception

What if parents' waited until their child is older to tell? Or never found the 'right time'? 'Telling' your child is possible at any age, it simply takes more preparation and is undertaken as an event rather than a process. Jana Rupnow in her book, *Three Makes Baby*, shares a phrase you can use, "We thought it was best to wait until you understood better, but now we wish we would have told you sooner."

1 If parenting as a couple, it is best to tell when both parents are present (even in the case of divorce or separation) so the child views this as a safe topic to discuss with both parents.

2 Parents will most likely want to get some guidance about handling this in a way that is specific to their own child's personality, current issues, etc.

3 Parents: explain why they did not tell previously, why they are telling now, and if they feel it is the right thing to do, apologize for not telling earlier.

When parents are 'telling' for the first time and the child is seven or older, it is likely to start with a 'sitting down and telling event' rather than being a process over the course of several years.

- Parents can prepare the ground by talking about how all families are different and sometimes parents need some help to make a baby.

8 years old

Children of eight or older have much greater understanding than those under this age. How they receive the news about being donor conceived is likely to depend as much on how parents feel and go about telling them as on their own personality and general way of dealing with things.

- If they understand immediately - not all children do make this link at first - that the information means they do not have a 'blood' connection to one parent (or both) then there may be an element of shock.
- Some children are interested in the science involved in donor conception and particularly IVF.
- Sometimes, especially the older ones (tweens and teens) may be angry at not having been told this information earlier.
- Some children are sad for a while that they are not connected by genes and blood to a much-loved parent. This can happen in middle childhood as part of the process of integration in children who have been told from a young age.

Feelings evolve. Many donor-conceived people say they had little, or no, interest in their conception story for years, until one day something happened: they were contacted by a sibling, completed a DNA test, had their own child, became unwell, and so on. How we feel about certain aspects of our lives can be fluid and feelings can ebb and flow.

4

It's okay for a parent to apologize as a form of empathizing with their child. No one intentionally sets out to cause harm to their children, but sometimes children experience pain about being donor-conceived; from learning they have multiple siblings, wanting information and having an anonymous donor, a rejection from genetic family, etc. Parents can apologize and encourage further dialogue as needed.

5

Donor conceived persons report appreciating their parents' acknowledgment of their pain and the fact that they may feel differently about donor conception than their parents

These kinds of conversations can build a stronger parent-child relationship.

6

Resources for DCPs



US
Donor Conceived
Council



DONOR ^{UK}
CONCEPTION
NETWORK



FACEBOOK GROUPS

- Adoptees, NPEs, Donor Conceived & Other Genetic Identity Seekers
- Anonymous US
- DNA for the Donor Conceived
- DNA Identity Surprise & This MPE Life
- Donor Children
- Donor Conceived Offspring, Donors, Parents
- Friends of Donor Conceived Individuals
- Gen Z Donor Conceived People
- International Donor Offspring Alliance
- MPE: Cross Cultural Connections from a DNA Surprise
- We Are Donor Conceived
- Worldwide Donor Conceived People Network



DOCUMENTARIES

- Anonymous Father's Day
- Baby God
- Donor Unknown
- Father Mother Donor Child
- Offspring
- Our Father
- Sperm Donors Anonymous



BOOKS

- *Experiences of Donor Conception: Parents, Offspring and Donors through the Years*, Caroline Lorbach
- *Go Ask Your Father: One Man's Obsession with Finding His Origins Through DNA Testing*, Lennard Davis
- *Inheritance: A Memoir of Genealogy, Paternity, and Love*, Dani Shapiro
- *Relative Strangers: Family Life, Genes, and Donor Conception*, Peter Nordqvist and Carol Smart
- *Scattered Seeds*, Jacqueline Mroz
- *The Genius Factory*, David Plotz
- *The Lost Family: How DNA Testing is Upending Who We Are*, Libby Copeland
- *The Ones We Choose*, Julie Clark (novel)
- *The Right to Know One's Origins: Assisted Human Reproduction and The Best Interests of Children*, Michelle Giroux, Juliet Guichon and Ian Mitchell
- *Uprooted*, Peter Boni
- *Who Am I: Experiences of Donor Conception*, Dr. Alexina McWhinnie

PARENTING BOOKS

- *Three Makes Baby*, Jana Rupnow

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

- *And Tango Makes Three*, by Justin Richardson
- *Building My Family: A Story of Egg Donation & Surrogacy*, Carrie Eichberg, Psy.D.
- *Extra*, Kaeleigh MacDonald
- *Families Come in Many Forms*, Bella Mei Wong
- *From the Start*, Stephanie Levich & Alana Weiss
- *Hope and Will Have a Baby: The Gift of Egg Donation*, Irene Celcer
- *It's NOT the Stork! A Book about Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families, and Friends*, Robie H. Harris
- *Little Treasure*, Anat Georgy
- *Meeting My Brother*, Jennifer L. Dukoff
- ***Our Story: How We Became A Family Series*, Nina Barnsley and Stephanie Clarkson**
- *Ready-Made Sweetie: All Mixed Up*, Whitney Williams
- *Sophia's Broken Crayons: A Story of Surrogacy from a Young Child's Perspective*, Crystal Falk
- *The Chicken Who Couldn't Lay Eggs*, Sabine-Julie De Brus
- *The Extra Button*, Jules Blundell (hetero family story)
- ***Telling and Talking Booklets*, UK DC Network**
- *Training Wheels; How Did I Get Here*, Chris Barrett and Sally B. Hunter
- ***What Makes A Baby*, by Cory Silverberg**
- *Zach's Safari: A Story about Donor Conceived Kids of Two-Mom Families*, Christy Tyner

PODCASTS/AUDIO

- BioHacked
- Go Ask Your Father
- Half of Us (Half of Me)
- I Want to Put a Baby in You!
- Message in a Bottle
- Three Makes Baby
- You Look Like Me

