

Impact of sperm donor information on parents and children

Parents who use sperm donation to have a family must consider whether or not to be open about the donor and the details of the child's donor origins. Current research suggests that when children learn at a young age, such as when pre-schoolers or pre-adolescents, they do not have negative responses to learning about their donor origins. As children grow, however, many are curious about their donors and want information that will help give them a sense of who the donors are. In turn, this donor information may help adolescents complete their own identities. With parental disclosure becoming more common, donor insemination programs are responding by providing more information about donors—a move that is likely to help both parents and their children.

In a recent study of families created through gamete donation, Golombok et al. reported that donor-conceived 2-year-olds had positive relationships with their parents and were as well adjusted as their naturally conceived peers.¹ In the donor-conceived families, children lacked a genetic tie with one of their parents. Yet, despite this, the findings look promising and add to the growing number of studies indicating positive outcomes for families who use gamete donation.²⁻⁵

But how do these families fare when the child reaches adolescence, a time when parent-child relationships can be particularly difficult and when identity becomes especially important to the youth? Does stress from continued parental secrecy increase and affect family relationships? Also, do individuals who know about their donor origins fare better or worse than those who do not? In a study of 11 to 12-year-olds, the donor-conceived families functioned well, but less than 10% of the youths knew about their origins.⁴ If adolescents accidentally discover their origins, will they appreciate or resent the efforts their par-

ents went through to have them? Will they realize that their parents were trying to protect them, or will they resent their parents for hiding the truth? In such scenarios, positive outcomes appear less likely.⁶⁻⁸ Partly in response to such risks, more parents are now telling their children about their donor origins. This



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KEY POINTS

- Studies of disclosure to young children show positive outcomes among families who used sperm donation.
- Recent research on disclosure indicates that children respond neutrally or positively to learning about their donor origins and that disclosure does not lead to rejection of the nongenetically related parent.
- Providing more donor information to families is critical to help donor-conceived people complete their sense of identity and to reduce frustration experienced by those without access to donor information.
- Open-identity donors provide both nonidentifying information and, when the offspring reach age 18, identifying information. These donors tend to be older, have children of their own, see donation as altruistic, and believe that adult offspring should have access to information about their genetic background and ancestry.

So far, findings indicate young children experience no effect or a positive outcome upon learning of their donor origins. However, we still have no answers about adolescents and whether disclosure or secrecy is better as children grow up.

move has allowed several studies of families with younger children, comparing those who know, or who will soon know about their origins to those who will not.^{1,5,9} So far, findings indicate no effect or a positive outcome associated with disclosure.

Disclosure to children

In heterosexual couples, not telling takes less effort than explaining infertility and donor conception to the child and others, and is relatively easy, because the parents have gone through the normal course of pregnancy. More important, some parents do not tell because they are concerned about disclosure's effect on the relationship between the child and the nongenetically related parent. They worry that the child might reject the parent.¹⁰ Parents might also fear that their child will be treated badly by peers and others for being different. Yet there is little evidence to support these fears.

In studies of adolescents or older children, the individuals learned about their origins at a young age and most often responded positively or neutrally.¹¹⁻¹⁴ As adolescents, they reported feeling wanted by their parents and/or that their origins were just a fact of life that they took for granted. Almost all reported being comfortable about their origins and discussing them with close friends and extended family. Finally, in contrast to parents' fears, youths did not appear to reject their

nongenetically related parent. Instead, as Vanfraussen et al. report, some appeared to protect the parent by expressing little interest in the donor.¹⁵ One might argue, however, that these results were the effect of being raised in families headed by lesbian couples or single women. But this was not necessarily the case; similar effects were also found among children raised by heterosexual couples.

The need for donor information

A final issue concerns donor information. Many donor-conceived individuals want information about their donor,^{12,15-17} but often there is little available. Thus parents fear that disclosure will just lead to frustration in their children. Indeed recent testimony by donor-conceived adults suggests this is a valid concern.¹⁸ It is important, however, to separate the effects of disclosure from the effects of having no information about the donor. None of these donor-conceived adults regretted knowing about their origins; instead it was the lack of donor information that frustrated them.

Why do donor-conceived children and adults want information about their donor? They are simply curious, much like individuals who are adopted.¹⁹ They want to know more about the donor to complete a picture of him, of who he is, and to help complete their own sense of identity.^{12,13,15}

The findings above suggest that it is necessary to make as much donor information as possible available to families. Indeed, the Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine recommends that gamete-donation programs keep donor information and expect that at least some families will want this information, when the parents are trying to conceive or, later, when their children get older.²⁰ Some countries have gone one step further and require that all gamete-donation programs be open-identity, thus giving adult offspring access

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to their donors' identities.²¹

It now appears the norm to make non-identifying information available to donor insemination recipients, as evidenced by the availability of donor information posted at program Web sites. Making identifying information available is a separate issue, however. One fear commonly expressed by many programs is that they will lose donors if the donors are expected to be identifiable, as was the case when Sweden legislated open-identity donation.²² But recent findings suggest that the nonidentifiable donors will be replaced by different kinds of people: men who are older, who have children of their own, who see donation as altruistic, and who believe that adult offspring should have complete information about their genetics.^{21,23,24}

Is being open-identity too much to ask of donors? Few studies have addressed this question. Findings from those that have suggest it is not too much. In a study of men who were sperm donors in the 1980s, about half chose to be open-identity. Up to 18 years later, as resultant offspring neared identity-releases, these men remained comfortable with their decision to be open-identity donors.²⁴ In addition, two recent studies report that half of existing donors would continue donating if

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they were required to release their identities to adult offspring.^{21,25} Thus, programs would probably experience a temporary decrease in donors, but all the donors will not disappear. The increased openness of these new donors might benefit the children, if more information helped reduce the possibility of experiencing frustration. It is unclear whether the United States will ever require gamete-donation programs to be open-identity. However, with parents increasingly choosing to disclose, it is a step in the right direction to see so much non-identifying donor information now available. We must now look at outcomes and determine whether or not open-identity donation is a positive choice for families in the United States. □

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