



# Being an egg or sperm donor: balancing 'being available' with 'knowing your place'?

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## Being an egg or sperm donor

# Balancing 'being available' with 'knowing your place'



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The everyday experience of being a donor can vary hugely. A woman donating eggs to strangers via a clinic might not expect to meet any child born from the donation for 18 years, if at all. A man who donates sperm to a lesbian couple after they signing up to a donor-matching website might meet the child as a baby and keep in touch with birthday cards and Facebook updates, and he might go on to donate to

another couple who prefer less day-to-day contact but want their child to be able to contact their donor without waiting until they are 18. Finally, a woman who donates eggs to a sister might see the child often at family gatherings.

Yet, despite these differences, when we talked to donors about what they thought were the responsibilities that came with being a donor, they almost

all agreed on two main points:

1. Donors should **'be available'** to the donor child
2. Donors should **'know their place'** and not overstep parental boundaries

How do donors balance what seem like contradictory responsibilities, to know their place without being too distant, and to be available without getting in the way of the parents?

## Knowing your place

People unfamiliar with donor conception often assume that, as donors have provided half the genetic material to create an embryo, this makes them a parent. Donors themselves described their connection to their donor offspring in different ways, and some of these labels did refer to their genetic connection: for example 'maternal link', 'genetic parent', or even for some sperm donors, 'father'. But whatever label they used, they were clear to distinguish the role of being a donor from that of being a 'real' parent. Whether or not donors had their own children, they contrasted the hands-on experience of day-to-day 'real' parenting, with the more hands-off experience of being a donor.

For example, Paige, who had donated her eggs to a family she did not know, used a gardening analogy, saying that her egg donation was a bit like providing a seed, and the parents were the ones who fed, watered and grew the children.

Many donors mentioned how 'real' parental stripes were earned through dealing with the daily life of caring for children: the sleepless nights, washing, caring and comforting.

It was clear from our interviews that donors had also thought carefully about how to demonstrate to their donor children and their parents that they 'knew their place'. Eliza donated eggs to her friend, but was extremely careful not to offer childcare advice on things like dealing with tantrums, even though she was close to her friend, and probably would have done so if she weren't the child's egg donor.

Andy had donated sperm to a lesbian couple he met online, and though he himself would have been happy to change nappies or give a feed when he visited, he made sure *not* to do this out of respect for the parents' role. He was especially sensitive to the feelings of the non-birth mother, and this was something that other donors talked about too.

By not overstepping these invisible boundaries to take on any of the activities we associate with being a parent, donors could demonstrate that they were not too attached to the donor child.

In the UK, egg and sperm donation is often described as a gift. Some donors made comparisons with blood or organ donation, giving to charity or giving presents to make clear that for them, donating egg or sperm was a gift to the parent(s):

*The agreement between me and them was, it's a gift for them, yeah. They want to be parents so this is a gift for you, enjoy it.*  
(Harry, known sperm donor)

## Being available to the donor child

UK donors who donate in a licensed clinic now sign a consent form to agree that donor children can seek to contact them when they reach the age of eighteen. (We refer to this as 'id-release' donation.) Many other donors choose to donate to people they know, or have met through donor-matching services. (We refer to this as 'known' donation.)

There is now a strong belief in society that donor conceived children have a 'right to know' their donor, and so their genetic background. This is reflected in UK law, which moved to mandatory identity-release donation in 2005. One of the reasons donors gave for opting for 'known' donation was to support at least the option for the donor child to know their donor from an early age.



Photo @jlanzarini on Unsplash

Paige likened donation to giving parents a seed, which they would then grow and care for.

The donors we spoke to, whether 'id-release' or 'known' donors, often felt a strong responsibility to be contactable and open to some kind of future relationship with their donor children:

*Those children have a right to know about how they came to be and that just shouldn't be contentious. They have that right and I'm on board with that law. (Wendy)*

Interestingly, a few donors used the same organ donation analogy that we saw earlier, to show that the responsibilities of egg and sperm donors were a bit different to those of blood or organ donors. Wes said:

*... it's something that people care about. It's not like I'm giving someone a kidney. A kidney doesn't make up who they are, it doesn't impact like nature versus nurture kind of idea. I feel, if I'm going to do this, it's also fair to be open to questions afterwards from the result. It's not like a completely meaningless act. No, you're helping someone create some life here.*

Donors, like Wes, recognised that donor children might want to get in touch with them because they had played a role in their conception, and because of the widespread belief that knowing 'where you came from' might be important to donor-conceived children. Donors tended to explain that it was important for children to know their genetic history, as this was part of who they were. But some donors recognised that donor children might want to make contact for reasons apart from knowing their



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genetic background. Louis, for example, said that he thought that donor children might contact him out of curiosity or because it might give them a sense of 'grounding and adjustment' from knowing who their donor was. Some donors thought that the child might want to know their reasons for becoming a donor.

Sarah, a known egg donor, explained this from her own experience. She described how even though she isn't particularly close to her own father,

*... I look just like my dad and there are aspects of his character that I recognise, and that gives me a sense of identity on both sides, and I wouldn't want to be without that through my formative years and my teen years. I can't imagine how confused I would have felt being like a sixteen year old and all the horrible stuff that comes with that, and not knowing who half of myself came from, even if they're not my parent, just 'what do they look like, what are they like?'*

In fact, Sarah's belief in the importance of donor children being able to know their personal genetic history through their donor was part of the reason she chose to donate to known recipients because this would mean that children would not have to wait until they were eighteen to contact her.

Donors who donated in clinics and did not know their recipients tended to think that eighteen was 'about the right age' to access identifying information. Wes, who is quoted earlier, also told us that he thought it was better for donor-conceived children not to meet their donor 'too young' in case it led them to over-emphasise the importance of genetics in their own sense of identity.

Whatever donors thought was the best age for donor children to be able to make contact, everybody who had donated since the law change in 2005 agreed that it was important for donors to be available and open to children born from their donation.

## A balancing act?

There were times when finding a balance between 'being available' and 'knowing your place' could be tricky. For example, Abby, who donated eggs to two couples, had talked in advance about how the donor/recipient relationship would work. As the children grew, it became clear that each couple thought of their relationship with Abby quite differently: one couple was very keen on contact between their family and Abby and her children, and by extension, her other donor child who they felt was part of their donor-conceived family; the other couple preferred more distance between Abby and their child. This created tensions, and eventually Abby's relationship with the second couple broke down.

We did come across examples, like this one, of donor-recipient relationships that had not gone as well as hoped, and we did speak to some known donors who had struggled to achieve a

balance they were happy with. We also spoke to many known donors who found the relationship enjoyable and rewarding. Of course, id-release donors do not yet have a 'live' relationship with either their recipients or their donor conceived child, so we don't yet know how these will unfold once contact is made.

Prospective 'known' donors could find it useful to think through how to put the ideas of 'being available' and 'knowing your place' into practice in their lives. Acknowledging that there is a balance to be found and talking about how that might work in practice could be a useful way of finding potential pitfalls in advance, although of course it is hard to imagine how your life and relationships might look in ten or twenty years.

Finally, it is important to remember that, although most donors sometimes puzzled about either 'knowing their place' or 'being available' or

both, it did not usually cause overwhelming difficulties.

Donors could sometimes find it challenging to balance their feelings of responsibility to both recipient parents and donor conceived young people, but in fact this experience of tension is not unique to donors. It is quite common for grandparents, or aunts and uncles, to feel something similar. It is something many of us recognise in our relationships, whether or not they involve donor conception.

## About the research

This leaflet is based on research from the 'Curious Connections' project which explored the impact of donating on the everyday lives of donors, their partners and their parents. The research was carried out at the Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives, University of Manchester. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

We interviewed egg and sperm donors, their partners and other family members, as well as fertility counsellors who worked with donors. Some of the quotations in this leaflet have been slightly edited, and all names have been changed.

Thank you to the donors, family members and counsellors who took part.

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