



Being an egg or sperm donor: The impact of donation on donors and their families

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Being an egg or sperm donor

The impact of donation on donors and their families



This leaflet explores the impact of egg and sperm donation on donors' own lives and family relationships.

It is common to focus on how donor conception affects the donor-conceived child, their parent/s and the donor.

But of course, donors are not 'just' donors. They are also parents, partners, children, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. How does donation affect these relationships?

Partners

Partners have a special place in decisions about egg and sperm donation. If a donor has a partner at the time of their donation, they would usually tell their partner, and felt it was important that they supported their decision.

This also came through in our interviews with counsellors working with donors. One counsellor, Madeleine, said:

We respect the donor's decisions and autonomy but

we also look at the consequences of that decision. It's not saying 'well you can't do this if your partner doesn't agree' but it's looking at the long term implications of their decision on their relationship. If the donor's partner is not supportive of the donor's decision we wouldn't recommend they go ahead with the treatment.

There is a tension here between the belief that adults should be able to make their own decisions, and the idea that decisions about

reproduction should be jointly agreed with a partner.

Partners who we interviewed for our research tended to be supportive of the decision to donate. Their engagement and involvement in the process varied. They weren't always sure how involved they 'should' be in the donation. Ewan, whose partner had donated eggs said:

I do feel invested in it, I want to know what happens as much as my partner does. You know, because you find out if these people have had a baby. But I don't know how invested I ought to feel. It's not me doing it. But I've tried to be a part of it all the way. I don't think she's been to an appointment on her own. It wasn't just 'her' thing, like, going out and joining a club.

We discovered that often partners, like Ewan, would feel themselves very involved in the donation, to the point where some couples talked about it being a joint project. There was a widespread agreement that partners had a right to have a say in the decision to donate, and so typically, they were told before the donation took place.

Children

Most donors in our research had told, or planned to tell, their children about being a donor. If the donation happened before

their own child was born, or when they were very little, parents might wait until their children were older. Fran said:

When I do have kids I'll tell them at a decent age that it's something that mummy's done and I'm proud of.

Many donors were curious about the connection between their own children and children born from their donation. Donors with older children sometimes found they were also curious about these children, who were their genetic half siblings.

As a donor, Annie felt strongly that it was right that any child born from her donated eggs should have the right to make contact when they reached 18.

When she later went on to have her own baby, Ryan, she realised that he would not have the same rights to make contact. Though she did not regret her decision to donate, she realised that it had unforeseen consequences for Ryan, who didn't even exist when the donation was made.

Not all children feel the same about donation, or the potential connections it creates. We found that children might have different views to their parents, or one child might love the idea of meeting a genetic half-sibling whereas another doesn't. Their opinions also change over time.

Parents and siblings

If it was typical for donors to consult or tell their partners and children about their donation, there was much less of a pattern about which other family members they told, and whether they were seen to have a say.

Donors usually decided who to tell (or not) based on their relationship with each friend or family member rather than on the particular role they occupied in their lives.

Most donors had told family members about their donation. In contrast to partners, they were usually not involved in the decision itself, but more often told after the process had started or after a child had been born.

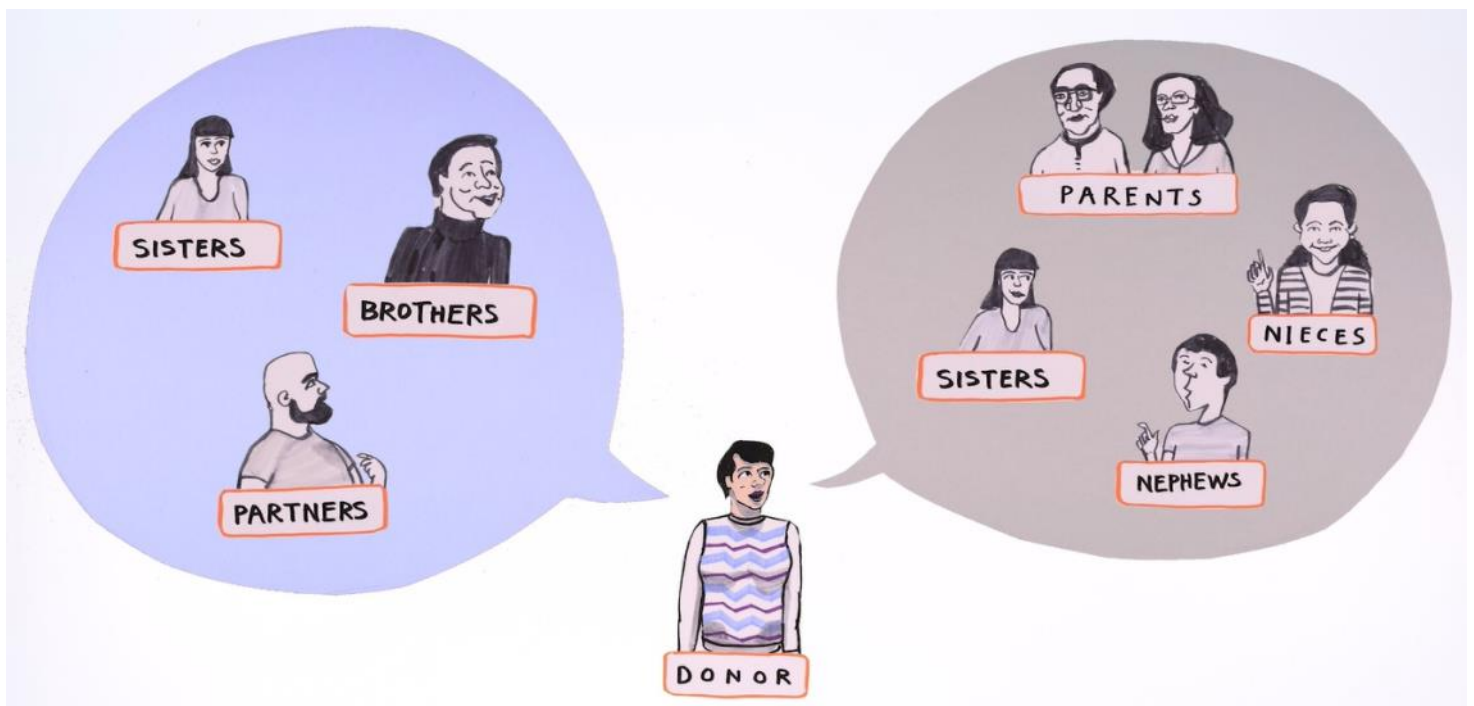
This belief was especially strong with regard to parents, as becoming a donor was seen as a decision that adult children should be able to make independently. Zoe, an egg donor, said:

I didn't feel like it was any of my parents' business. I didn't feel like they should have a part of it even though really it's genetically 50% of my children. It was something that I wanted to do. I didn't want them to hold me back.

Zoe recognised that her parents might have misgivings or doubts about her decision to donate. Part of the reason she gave for not telling them in advance was so that their reaction didn't stop her going ahead. Counsellors echoed this view, suggesting that if parents are involved in the decision to donate it might indicate a lack of independence in the donor. Dianne said,

Some donors bring their mums to counselling sessions. I wonder, 'Are you an adult? Can you do this on your own?'





Many donors decided whether to tell their parents, brothers, sisters and other family members on a case-by-case basis. They took into account things like the closeness of the relationship, and how they thought the person might react.

Andy had donated sperm to a lesbian couple who sent regular updates and photos of the child. He had told his sister and one brother about the donation. His sister was interested and he often shared the updates with her, but though his brother did not react negatively they didn't discuss the donation or the children. Andy hadn't told his other brother or his parents. He didn't think this brother would disapprove, but he thought he might let the knowledge slip to their parents. Andy decided against telling his parents:

They're in their 80s. I didn't want to disturb them and unsettle them. A big part of me would love them to know, I'm close to both of them. But particularly my dad struggles with unconventionality, if that's the word. I might tell them in years to come when there's a track record of things going well.

This 'pick and mix' approach to telling parents and siblings was typical among the donors we spoke to.

Managing reactions

Generally, like Andy, donors avoided telling relatives who they thought might not support their decision, reducing the potential for family members to have a negative reaction.

When they did tell parents and siblings about their donation, the reaction was not always what they expected. Parents and siblings could be excited, interested, deeply curious, or ambivalent, doubtful or disapproving.

Perhaps the most common unexpected reaction to the news was when family members showed a personal interest in the connection created by the donation.

Many donors had thought carefully about the connections between them and the donor-conceived child and even the child's parents. They had considered what this connection meant to *them* and what *their* responsibilities were to the donor-conceived child.

Rachel had told her mum she was going to donate her eggs, but once a baby was born it was clear that she and her mum had different ideas about what that meant. Rachel said:

After I told my mum that my recipient had been successful, my mum was like, 'It's like having another grandchild somewhere', and I was like, 'No it's not'. I felt it important to stress to her that wasn't the case, because that's not how I perceive it to be.

Donors felt they were in charge of deciding how the connection to the donor-conceived child 'should' work for their family. This was often an attempt to protect their relatives' feelings. When they knew the identity of their recipients, donors could feel responsible for making sure that their own family sticks to the *recipients'* rules about how much involvement they want from the donor.

When family members, like Rachel's mum, did have different views about the donation, they tended not to challenge the donor's view. For some this meant not showing their curiosity in the donor-conceived child, and not voicing any



misgivings. As Rose, the sister of an egg donor, put it:

There are some things on my mind. None of them causes me sleepless nights, or concern, or worrying. It's more of a kind of 'Mmm, I wonder about this' or 'Isn't it weird that x, y, z'.

Rose describes these thoughts as 'wonderings' rather than strong objections, but even so, she still wasn't comfortable bringing them up with her sister.

Like Rose, Louise's sister also told her that children had been born from her donated eggs, but Louise's reaction was much stronger. She found the news shocking and upsetting and found she couldn't stop thinking about how her own daughter had cousins 'out there' who she might never meet.

Even when parents and siblings were deeply unsettled by the donation, they did not feel it was their place to share their feelings with the donor. For this reason, it was rare for these tensions to lead to open conflict in families. Instead, they found ways of managing the tensions by not talking about them, or minimising them.

Conclusion

Our research shows that there are more people who feel they are involved in a donor's decision to donate eggs or sperm that we might at first think.

Donors (and counsellors) agreed that partners and children are affected by the donation, but they did not feel the same about other family members, like parents or brothers and sisters. These people were not involved in the decision to donate and most of them only found out about the donation after it happened. And of course, many family members are not told about the donation at all.

This creates a hierarchy in who gets to shape connections created by donor conception. When donors know their recipients, it is the recipients who (mainly) decide how the relationship will work. And donors (mainly) decide what the donation means for their family.

Importantly, however, we found that family members can and do define for themselves what the donation means, even if they might not feel able to say so.

Our research shows that by broadening how we think about donor conception, and looking at how it works in different families, we can begin to see it as a connection that can, for some families, be felt quite widely, and in different ways for different people.

We are now used to the idea of donor-conceived children might sense a connection with the donor and 'donor siblings' (other children born using egg or sperm from the same donor). Perhaps we should also start to consider how donor conception connections can be felt in other directions too, including from the donor's own family.

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, at the University of Manchester and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

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The University of Manchester,
Oxford Road,
Manchester,
M13 9PL
United Kingdom

Royal Charter RC000797

