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## Middle-class motherhood in crisis: The single career women who wish their donor babies had fathers

- Devoted mums now question their decision to use sperm donors
- They admit it was last resort after failing to meet Mr Right
- They worry about long-term effect on their children

By [Frances Hardy](#)

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There is no doubt Freya McCallin was a wanted child. That she will always be loved unconditionally by her mum and large extended family is also incontrovertible.

But there is another significant truth about Freya: she will never know her genetic father.

Indeed, as Freya's mum Jessica travelled to Copenhagen from her home in South London to be inseminated with the donor sperm that produced her daughter, this omission from her child's family tree was the one concern that preyed upon her mind.



**Won't know her father: Jessica McCallin and daughter Freya who was conceived using a Danish sperm donor**

For sperm donors in Denmark — unlike those in the UK who may be contacted by their offspring when they reach 18 — have a legal right to remain anonymous. Men who donate sperm there can't be traced by any potential offspring.

This explains why the sperm donation industry in Denmark is the largest in the world, and why increasing numbers of British women are travelling there to undergo the quick and relatively inexpensive procedure that endows them with the greatest gift of all: creating a new life.

It also helps to explain why, because of seismic shifts in Britain's fertility landscape — highlighted in last

week's Femal magazine cover story — the shape and make-up of our nation's families is changing irrevocably.

## 'My concern is that the need to know who your father is, even if he has no meaningful role in your life'

Today, in part two of our investigation, we examine some of these new 'diverse' families, and speak to the single mothers — all professionals with degrees — who are raising donor children without fathers.

In last week's dispatch, we interviewed educated women who have remained childless; either from choice or because they deferred motherhood in favour of their careers, only to find out they had passed the age of fertility.

As our report showed, the consequences have been dramatic: middle-class Britain is having fewer and fewer children, with larger families increasingly the preserve of the poorer and disadvantaged.

But the rise in middle-class women remaining childless is not the only factor at work here.

Since 2008, when the law changed to allow single women to be donor inseminated, small, self-contained and fatherless family units like Jessica and Freya's are burgeoning.

There are now two million lone-parent families in the UK — they account for one in four of the nation's families — and rising numbers of them are headed by educated, middle-class women.

Many of these, forced by the ticking of their biological clocks and their failure to find the right partner, have procreated by non-traditional methods such as sperm donation, egg donation and IVF.

Because typically these women are deferring motherhood until they are 35 when their fertility is in perilous decline, they are often having just one child. It is also financially very exacting to raise a child alone.



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**Couldn't wait any longer: Milla Ovenden had son Max at the age of 44 with the help of egg and sperm donors after failing to find Mr Right**

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That is another reason why Middle England is producing fewer offspring. And why, conversely, poorer households — because benefits rise in line with the size of their family — who have relatively little to gain from limiting their fertility, are growing.

But what will be the emotional fall-out for this new generation of donor children who grow up without knowing their fathers? This is one of the great imponderables in this brave new world of diverse families.

'The urge to discover our roots and our relationship with those who have provided half of our DNA is elemental, says Adrienne Burgess, joint CEO of the Fatherhood Institute. 'The literature is clear: some donor children are haunted by their situation and go searching.'

Jessica McCallin, a writer and broadcaster from South-East London, chose a Danish donor for her daughter Freya because her family originates from the north of England, an area conquered by the Norsemen, and it seemed reasonable to assume she had Scandinavian ancestry.

She knew it would also be helpful to her child if she shared her blonde hair and blue eyes — as indeed Freya does.

## 'Not a day goes by when I don't agonise about the consequences of my actions'

Whether her daughter will be troubled by not knowing her father's identity, she cannot say.

'My concern is that the need to know who your father is, even if he has no meaningful role in your life, seems pretty deep-seated. I'll answer Freya's questions in an age-appropriate manner as they arise.'

Louise Janson, from South London, also mother to a donor daughter, is less sanguine.

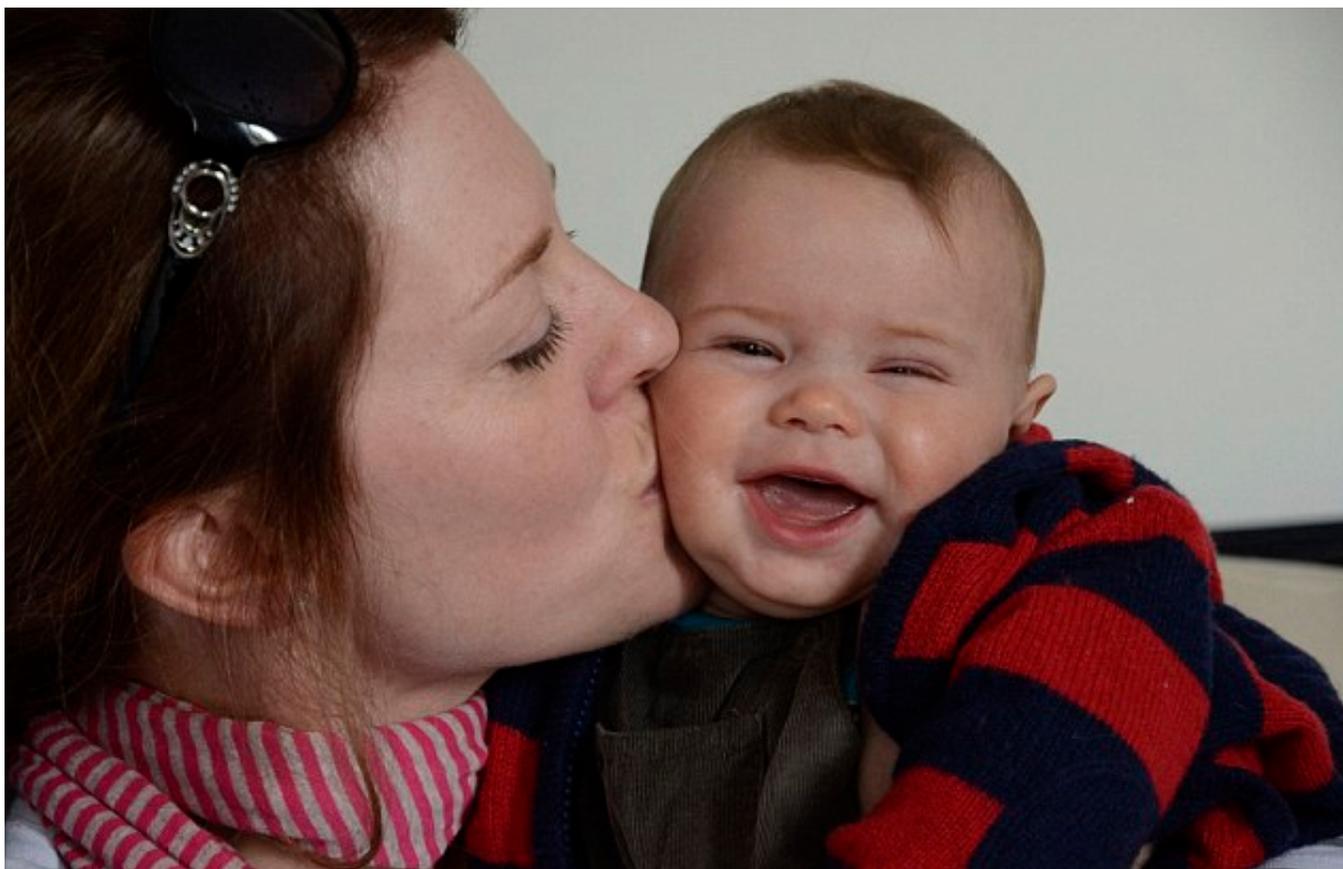
Louise chronicled her tumultuous journey towards single motherhood (five cycles of IVF, four pregnancies, two sets of identical twins lost, two miscarriages and one medically-advised termination) in the Mail.

And although 'beyond ecstatic' about the arrival of her healthy and happy daughter, Millie Rae, now five, she has never felt comfortable about the decision to deny her daughter a dad.

'Like many women, I had long experienced a tremendously powerful maternal urge, but I never dreamt I'd wind up in a situation where I had to make such a devastating life-choice: to remain childless for the rest of my life because Mr Right hadn't arrived, or to actively bring a child into the world without a father.

'The starkness and gravity of those two choices were terrifying. Yes, I chose the latter option, but I don't really approve of the decision.

'And I'm still shocked by it. Not a day goes by when I don't agonise about the consequences of my actions. And every friend of mine who's done the same, says the same. We are racked with anxieties — and rightly so.'



**Anonymous parents: Milla only knew her donors' blood types, ages and that they're in good health to have baby Max**

Nurse Caroline Saddington, 40, from Newark, Nottinghamshire, who has a four-year-old son William by a UK sperm donor, concedes that solo parenting is a compromise, not an ideal.

'In your teens you envisage marriage and two children,' she says. 'Then my 20s were career-focused and I got to my 30s and hadn't met a man good enough to be a father. They fell far short of my expectations.'

'But life doesn't always work out as you wish it to. I don't regret that mine has taken a different course. How could I? If I'd done anything different I wouldn't have William and he means the world to me.'

Caroline had one criterion when choosing her sperm donor: that he should be an intellectual. She duly waited for an appropriate UK donor — an academic.

## **'During art activities, they're encouraged to draw their family trees - and my child's tree has only one branch'**

However, Milla Ovenden, 46, from Crouch End, North London — a music teacher and mum to 18-month-old Max, who was born with the help of both donor sperm and eggs — was compelled by the ticking of her biological clock to take the quickest route to motherhood, so her specifications were less exacting.

'I'd reached 43 and hadn't met a man who wanted to commit to having children, and time was running out. A man can wait, but a baby can't,' she says.

'I had several unsuccessful attempts at IVF using my own eggs and donor sperm, and the next stage was to use an egg donor. In England you sometimes have to wait three years, and because I didn't know if it would work — and time was not on my side — I went to Spain, to a clinic recommended by the London hospital that had been treating me. Because donors remain anonymous there, there's no shortage of them and the process is much quicker.'

'I was told very little about the donors; only their blood types, ages and that they're in good health.'

The mothers of donor children who I was put in touch with were, without exception, loving, caring and devoted to their much-wanted children.

Adrienne Burgess is, however, adamant: a stable nuclear family offers a child the best start in life.

'The term "male role model" implies distance and suggests the only value we put on men is to be models of masculinity,' she says. 'I don't think that's what parenting is about. It's about the intimate care of your children; about them knowing that the people who raised them and made them love and approve of them.'

'Children raised by two biological parents, who love each other and are good parents, have a massive advantage. That is the optimum situation.'



**Optimum situation: A stable nuclear family offers a child the best start in life but not everyone can achieve this ideal**

And the unavoidable financial fact persists: solo mums — whose sperm donors relinquish all responsibility for their multiple offspring once they have made their deposit at the clinic — are the only providers in their one-parent households.

In essence they are, of course, doing the job of two parents — in itself, the most demanding job in the world — and the pressures on them are enormous and relentless.

For Ruth Rackham, 48, a TV production executive from Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, who has a donor son Luca, now eight, the early years of his life were fraught with strain.

Ruth, who had failed to find a suitable partner at 39, had Luca with a friend named Nico as sperm donor because she feared her chances to become a mum were receding.

## Older not wiser

## Sue Tollefsen was the oldest woman in the UK to have a child at 57, but

## now regrets her decision

'Although Nico plays an active role in Luca's life, he lives in Spain and it was hard at times to cope,' she concedes. 'Parenting takes a physical and emotional toll.'

Ruth, who has since married, now finds her unconventional family taking on a new shape: her son has a stepfather, Tim, and a donor father, Nico. Ruth refers to this 'wealth of familial contacts' as a positive.

But will the lives of such children as Luca be enriched or merely confused?

'The reality is tough,' concludes Louise Janson. 'I've imposed a set of circumstances on an innocent child who didn't ask for them, and that's a responsibility I bear with a heavy heart. My daughter is the only child in her class, possibly in her entire school, who has never met her biological father.'

'My actions have forced her to be different from her peers, and kids like to be the same as their peers. Every story book we read has a mother and a father in it. Every break-time, groups of kids are playing "Mummies and Daddies". During art activities, they're encouraged to draw their family trees — and my child's tree has only one branch.'

It remains to be seen whether this kind of situation will prove important or inconsequential to the future wellbeing of these children.

But the debate will continue, and in the final analysis, only children like Millie Rae, Freya, William and Max — all of them beloved by mothers who went to exceptional lengths to have them — will know the answer.

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