

Lifeclass: should parents tell a donor child about their true origins?

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This week, Lesley Garner helps a mother decide whether to tell her daughter of her true origins

Dear Lesley,

I am writing to you about a matter that concerns me deeply as a mother and grandmother, but it is a problem that will become more and more common with the advancement of fertility treatments. In its simplest terms, the dilemma is: should children born using donor sperm be told of their origins?

I have a grandchild born by this method prior to the legislation regarding donor anonymity and I feel she should be told about it sympathetically, with the support of specialist counsellors, while she is still young. The consequences, if she found out accidentally in later life, could be very damaging. The increasing use of DNA makes it more likely that she could accidentally stumble upon this truth.

My daughter had agreed with her now ex-husband to keep the truth from their child, but I know she would always have preferred openness and honesty. Although the procedure was carried out at one of the foremost centres in the country, there was little in the way of counselling either before or after treatment. I would greatly appreciate your views on this matter.

Helena

Dear Helena,

I understand your worry. But before I say anything I think you need to accept that, ultimately, this decision is up to your daughter - being a concerned grandparent involves exercising a lot of self-restraint.

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However, I am going to give you plenty of evidence in favour of telling the children of sperm donors of their origins when they are as young as possible. Secrets, even benevolent secrets surrounding the desire to have a much-loved child, can be damaging. The longer they are kept, the more damage they can do when they are finally revealed.

The added complication here is that your daughter and son-in-law have separated. This may have nothing to do with the father's infertility but I would be very surprised if the couple's difficulty in



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having children, and their need for a sperm donor, wasn't at least a part of the breakdown.

The fact that your daughter's husband made her promise not to tell their child of her true origins is a bit of a clue. So your daughter has two problems on her hands: the problem of telling her child the truth and the problem of her husband's attitude towards their decision. Again, only she can solve these difficulties but I can offer you information to pass on to her that may strengthen her position.

Around 2,000 children are born in Britain each year from donated eggs, sperm or embryos, and there are some 500 sperm donors. There was great concern, in 2004, about the change in legislation that gave the children of sperm donors the right to trace their genetic parents at 18 (though not the right to claim support from them).

It was feared that the loss of anonymity would mean a dramatic drop in donors but, in fact, the number rose by six per cent in the year following this law. The nature of donors seems to have changed. Fewer students are donating, and there has been a rise in donations from men in their thirties, who already have families but who want to help others have a child.

Children born between 1991 and 2004, when the new legislation (which is not retrospective) came in, still have the right to find out certain facts about their genetic parent by consulting the sperm donors' register at the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. Without knowing their parent's identity they can still be given a physical description and discover his age, ethnic group and - of great interest - whether they have any siblings.

Since 2004, they can now have more information, including a medical history. Any child of a sperm donor who is planning to marry can contact the Authority to see if they are genetically related to their future partner. In the words of the Authority: "It is natural to want to know about your genetic origins and the register was set up with this in mind."

But in order to want to know more, you have to know the truth in the first place, and it seems that your instinct is right - the younger a child is told, the more easily they adapt. A study done by the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge and the Donor Sibling Registry of the United States contacted 165 offspring via the Donor Sibling Registry.

The researchers found that the age at which children were told made a great difference to their attitude. Thirty per cent of those questioned had been told before the age of three, and these children felt as if they had always known - their main emotion about their parentage was curiosity. Nineteen per cent had been told after the age of 18, and found the discovery traumatic. They reported feeling confused, shocked, angry and, interestingly, relieved.

It seems that many children have an instinct that something isn't quite right and suspect that facts are being hidden. A child told at 12 said: "Parents should tell from the beginning - finding out was one of the most shocking and upsetting moments of my life." Another reports feeling physically sick: "The news was earth-shattering."

So how do you tell a very young child of their true origins? I direct you and your daughter to the Donor Conception Network (PO Box 7471, Nottingham, NG3 62R; 0208 245 4369). It has an excellent website - www.dcnetwork.org - packed with useful information and material that looks at donor insemination from the angles of everyone involved. I recommend that you read two of its open letters to would-be parents, written by Olivia Montushi and Walter Merricks, the network's founders, themselves the parents of two donor children.

The letter from Olivia on the subject of "Telling" is particularly helpful. One of her many points is

that, if you leave it too late, "you can find yourself unwittingly spinning an increasingly complicated web of lies, both to the child and to others. This can start as soon as your child is born."

The other letter, from Walter to would-be dads, is illuminating; both your daughter and your son-in-law should read it. Donor insemination is particularly challenging and threatening to the infertile father, even when they go through with it, and these complex emotions must lie behind your son-in-law's insistence on secrecy. But, although his decision is understandable, I think events have already proved him wrong and to be the potential source of future damage.

There is also a letter from Zannah, Olivia and Walter's 21-year-old daughter, talking of her feelings about donor insemination. Her origins were always an open subject at home, and consequently, she says: "It has not been a big issue in my life."

Crucially, she goes on: "There has never been a question about who my father is. A father is someone who loves and raises you, not the person who provided the sperm to make you. I have known from the earliest age that 'Daddy' means love, and not sperm. It takes a real man to face up to his infertility. My dad taught me what a real man is."

It is a shame that your son-in-law is no longer in a position to be this kind of fully involved, hands-on father day to day. I hope that your daughter will find that the material on this website gives her some understanding of his possible feelings, and that it forms the basis for a renegotiation of their family responsibilities. I wish all of you luck in bringing up your family honestly and without secrets.

- What do you think? Have you had experience of "telling" family secrets, or found out one about yourself? Or do you have a completely different problem for me to look at? Please write to me at: Lesley Garner, Features, The Daily Telegraph, 111 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 0DT or email me at: lesley.garner@telegraph.co.uk.

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