

Sperm Donors' Offspring Reach Out Into The Past

But those searching for roots can run into rules and dead ends
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There is no parenting manual for the questions that nag Bobby Gerardot. What exactly is his relationship to Katie Whitaker, the 21-year-old who contacted him three years ago after discovering he was the sperm donor responsible for her birth? Is he her father, with all that role entails? If not that, what--a fatherly friend? And how does he integrate Whitaker and her mother, who have moved to his hometown, into his life with two young sons and his wife, Lisa? "I'm still trying to figure it out," said Gerardot, who readily admits that coming into contact with Whitaker has "shaken everything up."

As the first large generation of sperm donor babies comes of age, some are beginning to look for their biological dads, much as adopted children have sought out their birth parents. The searches pit young people's desire to discover their roots against donors' expectations that their identities never will be disclosed. Like so many new developments, this one is unfolding in large part on the Internet, where many sperm donor offspring are posting queries about their origins and claiming a right to know their parentage.

Increasingly, that right is being recognized abroad. This spring, Britain became the latest country to say that children conceived this way can find out, when they turn 18, who the donor was. Several other European countries have similar laws.

Dr. Joseph Feldschuh of Idant Laboratories, a large sperm bank in New York City, is appalled by the developments. "Most donors really don't want any kind of relationship with their offspring," he said. "Eliminate anonymity and you eliminate a great many donors."

Young people also are trying to find their donor dads by asking sperm banks to make contact on their behalf (some will, most

won't), delving into their mother's medical files and following any clues, such as the donor's occupation.

Ann, who lives on the East Coast and asked that her last name not be used, suspected her mother's gynecologist was her sperm donor and sent him a package with a DNA sample, inviting him to have it compared to his own. When the package was sent back with a curt "I can't help you" response," Ann searched through the university's archives in his hometown, hoping to find a visual clue in a college yearbook picture. "There was instant familiarity," she said, describing her reaction upon finding the doctor's photograph. "He has the same face as my daughter, the same eyes as my son. I just knew."

The booming sperm bank business in the United States largely is unregulated, and no one keeps track of how many donors father how many infants. Conservative estimates put the number of offspring from anonymous donors at more than 30,000 a year, or 1 million total, but this is little more than guesswork. Men are paid about \$65 to \$100 per sample.

Experts say as many as 80% of offspring never have been told how they were conceived. Those who do know tend to be intensely curious about their donors, according to the few research studies conducted. In a survey of adolescents published in November in the journal *Human Reproduction*, researchers at the University of California–Davis found that the thing the children wanted most, other than the donor's name, was a picture.

"They are not looking to establish a father–son/daughter relationship and [they] are not looking for financial or other support," said Eric Blyth, a professor of social work at the University of Huddersfield in England, who has written extensively about the topic. What they want, he says, is "a more complete sense of their identity." But with sperm banks committed to privacy, making any kind of connection isn't easy.

The only information Lindsay Greenawalt, 21, of Canton, Ohio, has to go on is this: The donor was about 5 feet 8 inches tall, with brown hair and blue eyes, and he left the sample at Xytex Corp. in Augusta in 1984. After years of wondering "Who is he? Do I look like him? Does he like the same stuff I do?" she contacted the sperm

bank two years ago. But her donor had been told his identity would never be disclosed, and Xytex would not make any sort of contact on Greenawalt's behalf. Frustrated, the college student is considering filing a lawsuit to gain access to whatever medical information the company has. "I feel my right to know who I am and where I come from has been taken away," she says.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine is sympathetic to the desires of offspring for more information, especially about a donor's health history. But the organization also says contracts ensuring anonymity must be honored, spokesman Sean Tipton said. "We have all these agreements with donors saying, 'We'll never tell,' and it'd be wrong to back out on them," agreed Sheridan Rivers, sales supervisor at Xytex.

When Carol Pace found out her first husband was infertile and pursued sperm donation, she was advised not to tell her child. At the time, sperm donation was a taboo subject, thought to be damaging to a man's ego and destructive to his family. "As a woman dealing with the prospect of infertility, all you want is that baby," said Pace, 51, of Center, Texas. "It never even occurred to me this child might want to find her biological father some day."

But that is the goal of her daughter, Eve Andrews, 17. The man Andrews calls "my dad" died when she was 7, and although she has a close relationship with her stepfather, she says she wants "to know the other half of me ... the person who is responsible for me being here." Andrews is planning to ask the sperm bank, California Cryobank, to forward a letter to her donor when she turns 18. "There's a lot of unanswered questions in my life and I guess I want the answers," she said.

Bruce Schaefer, 63, who spent 16 years supplementing his income as a spermdonor until 1992, understands the impulse. Schaefer recently put a notice up with an Internet chat group, saying he'd be interested in talking to any offspring. In all the years Schaefer sold his sperm, he says he didn't think much about children; he only recently started imagining sons and daughters he's never met. "I'd be curious to see what they might look like, what kind of people they are ... and it might be fun to send Christmas cards," said Schaefer of Wheaton, Md. So far, no one has responded to the notice.

Some sperm banks are changing their practices in response to changing expectations about access to the donors. California Cryobank, the nation's largest sperm bank, late last year began an "open donor" program, in which men agree to have at least one contact with a child when he or she is 18 or older. About a third of donors choose open arrangements, while two-thirds seek anonymity, said Dr. Cappy Rothman, California Cryobank's medical director. A large competitor, the Genetics and IVF Institute, which runs sperm banks in Virginia and Minnesota, also is launching an open donor program this fall.

The concept was pioneered at the Sperm Bank of California in 1983. Since the first offspring from that program turned 18 in 2001, 15 out of 120 eligible men and women have come forward for information, said Alice Ruby, executive director. Some donor-child pairs now "see and e-mail each other often," Ruby said, "but others met once or twice and that was enough." Some offspring haven't contacted the donors yet, "maybe because having a little information was all they needed" or because they're waiting until they graduate from college or have children of their own, she says.

The truth about Katie Whitaker's background came out in a heated argument with her mother in fall 2000. "I was going through my rebellious period, running with the wrong crowd, drinking, sneaking out at night, and mom figured out I'd been lying to her," Whitaker said. "I told her, 'Well, I've been lying to you all your life too,'" said her mom, Carol Tweedle, 50. "Your father is not your biological father. ... You're a product of artificial insemination."

Whitaker wasn't hurt or angry, she said, but gradually a sense of confusion grew. In particular, she remembers standing in front of the mirror one morning thinking, "I don't look like anyone I know." It's a strange feeling "to be seeing my face and think part of me comes from someone my mother never even met," she said.

After several contacts with the sperm bank, Xytex, a sympathetic employee agreed to make contact with Gerardot early in 2002. Gerardot was at home eating lunch when the call came. "I was like, hold on, this wasn't supposed to happen," said Gerardot, who spent the next few weeks talking about little else with his wife.

Eventually the couple asked Whitaker to send a letter. "No matter what contact we have, half of my chromosomes are yours," the teen said in the handwritten note. Two things clinched the deal for Gerardot: his own experience of being an adopted child who had searched for his birth parents and a photo of Whitaker looking straight into the camera. "I looked at that picture and I saw myself and I knew, this was the real deal," Gerardot says.

Things progressed quickly. Gerardot wrote back, Whitaker called, they spoke on the phone for almost three hours, she and her family drove to Augusta for a visit. More visits followed, and in 2003 Tweedle, who had divorced, decided to move with her daughter to Augusta so the relationship could be something more than long-distance. The Gerardots, who have two young sons, opened their home and their hearts to Whitaker. "They've taken me to barbecues and trips to the zoo, and they've taken me being a pain-in-the-butt teenager and hitting bottom," she said.

As connections have deepened, Lisa Gerardot and Carol Tweedle have become friends. Tweedle and Whitaker baby-sit for the Gerardot boys. Tweedle and Bobby Gerardot spend Father's Day and Mother's Day together, with all the kids. "It's like I knew him before I met him because he and Katie are so alike," Tweedle said.

Still, there are plenty of challenges for Gerardot, who describes himself as "reeling" from the intense emotional impact of the encounters with his daughter. "There's no book you can go to and learn what is the etiquette," he said. "I mean, Emily Post has written a lot of things and that's not one of them." What is he supposed to do, for example, when Whitaker messes up in school, just as he did? Or when she wears blouses cut so low, he doesn't even want to imagine what the boys are thinking? Tell her off? Do nothing? Talk to her mom?

"To think about all the interactions and make sure they're appropriate and healthy and don't hurt people, it's taken a tremendous amount of energy," Lisa Gerardot said. "Be prepared that it absolutely is not going to go the way it is in your head," she added. "It may be better, it may be worse, but it's not going to be what you expect."

There is agreement in this unusual extended family that something is being overlooked in the anonymous sperm donation model: the children. And that, they believe, is a terrible oversight. "People don't want to comprehend the power of a biological connection," Lisa said. "These kids, they're going to find their donors, they're going to look for their half-siblings--it's going to happen because there's a fundamental drive to do it, and these sperm banks need to start counseling families that this is what could come."