



News

The kids are all right...without knowing who 'dad' is?

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Last year, lesbian family issues came to the big screen in the hit film "The Kids Are All Right." Julianne Moore and Annette Bening play a lesbian couple who each gave birth to a child from the same sperm donor. They grapple with their now teenage children's desire to meet and know the donor. It's a situation not far from reality for many families, both gay and straight, who have used donor-assisted reproduction. In true Hollywood style, the teens are able to meet the donor (who miraculously lives in the same city). But are the kids all right when they don't know who their donor is?



The Tribeca Film Festival documentary "Donor Unknown" explored what happens when donor-conceived children look for, and find, their dad. (Photo by Jerry Rothwell)

Thirty to sixty thousand children are conceived each year in the United States using donor sperm, eggs or embryos. The majority of these donors gave their genetic material under the condition of complete anonymity. There was often no way for the offspring to track down their biological parent or other progeny by the same donor. However, in 2000, one very curious child and his mother started a Yahoo group to begin his search for his donor. As they began to receive media attention and interest grew, they created the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR: donorsiblingregistry.com) — a website dedicated to connecting mutually interested siblings as well as anonymous donors, should they decide to come forward. With more than 30,000 members and 8,000 matches made, the site does more than just facilitate connections — it's a source of research, support and advocacy.

Many people may wonder why donor-conceived children would be so interested in finding their donor. In "The Kids Are All Right," Moore's teenage son begins to reach out to the donor as a father figure — arguably the worst fear for many lesbians who conceived with the help of unknown donors. Yet research spearheaded by the DSR shows that this is not one of the main reasons kids "see what the donor looks like"; 69.2% wanted to know more about their ancestry — while only 36.9% wanted to "establish a relationship with the donor."

In the documentary "Donor Unknown," shown at the Tribeca Film Festival here in NYC last week, we get some perspective on donor-conceived children and their concerns. The film follows JoEllen Marsh and several of her half-siblings who connected through the DSR on their journey to meet their sperm donor after he reveals his identity. Speaking about her reasons for wanting to find her donor, JoEllen comments that she is able to trace her lineage on her mother's side all the way back to the Mayflower, but on the other side there is just "a big question mark." Enter Donor 150: Jeffrey Harrison, a beach bum living out of an RV in Venice Beach with his four dogs. While we see the children pouring over photos they have collected of Jeffrey and commenting on the traits they all share with him (they all have the same eyebrows and forehead, they all love animals and have "laid back" personalities), when the siblings meet him for the first time it is very clear that their interest has nothing to do with their relationship with the parents that raised them nor their need for someone to fill some sort of parental role but their genuine curiosity over their genetic origins.

For many children, finding their donor is really only part of their journey. Since many unknown donors have been used by more than one family, these genetic half-siblings may be curious about each other. It may be comforting in some ways to find others like themselves, but is also likely to provoke complex emotions for kids. These children may have to wrap their heads around the fact that they have not one, not two, not even ten half-siblings, but quite possibly dozens of unknown blood relations. Currently on DSR there are "families" of up to 130 children related through the same donor. Consequently, incest is not an uncommon concern for these children. Considering the fact they may have so many siblings, it is likely that there will be children who do not know the truth about their donor origin. One of the kids in "Donor Unknown" goes as far as to only date men who were born in Latin America to allay her fears.

There are other less emotionally based reasons that many donor-conceived children may look for their donor as well, namely to find out about genetically linked medical conditions. Many people who decide to use donor sperm or eggs may not be aware that banks are not required to contact donors for updated medical information after their initial intake as a healthy twenty-something. Nor are they required to contact families about suspected medical conditions that arise in other children of the same donor. Children may wonder what medical issues they are at risk for. Should they be getting early colonoscopies or following their cholesterol more closely?

When many lesbian couples set out to create their families using donor material, they may be oblivious to these future issues. They are often focused on the goal of getting pregnant — a shortsighted goal that is reinforced by banks and reproductive endocrinologists. The children of Donor 150 all remarked that their parents never thought Jeffrey would come up in their lives again after their initial decision to use him as a donor. "But for us kids, it's just different," says JoEllen.

I had the opportunity recently to participate in a webinar (a web-based seminar) with DSR creator Wendy Kramer. She pointed out that many kids see the donor as the other half of who they are, and those feelings deserve to be validated and respected. Kramer maintains that children will have needs surrounding their donor, which should be acknowledged by prospective parents before making the decision to use donor-assisted reproduction.

Kramer believes that donor-conceived children have the right to know where they came from — both their medical history and their donor's identity. She goes as far as saying that anonymous donation should be made illegal to ensure that the children's needs are put first. While an interesting idea, there are already thousands of children out there who will struggle with their questions and concerns surrounding their identity. With open and honest dialogue and complete disclosure of donor information (as well as an open mind towards their children's desire to connect with siblings and donors), parents can help ensure that the kids will indeed be all right.

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