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Family & Fatherhood

What Is A Father: The Genetic Parent

As told to: Jennifer Wolff, Photograph: Alessandra Petlin
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Mike Rubino, 47, artist, sperm donor, father of untold numbers of children

I might have 10 kids, or I might have 50 kids. I have no idea. For sure I know about seven kids through six different mothers who live in six different states, from New York to Hawaii.

I donated sperm once or twice a week for about five years in the early 1990s. Before that, I was one of those people who spent their life savings on fertility treatments, trying to get my ex-wife pregnant, to no avail. She was infertile, but I wasn't. We felt that by donating, I could help couples going through what we went through, plus pay for groceries for the week.

Each time I gave a sample, I was aware, Wow, there could be a child produced from this. And I told the sperm bank I was open to having contact with any of them after they turned 18. I had this vision of being in my fifties and having these teenagers showing up at my door, looking similar to me, and saying, "Hi, Dad. Want to go for coffee?"

Several years after my divorce, I found the Donor Sibling Registry, a Web site where donor offspring can find their half siblings and, sometimes, their donors. Rachael, one of the moms, had listed her two kids, Aaron and Leah, under my donor number. When I saw their names and their ages—6 and 3 at the time—I got very weepy. Oh my God, these were my kids!

Within hours, we were talking on the phone. Rachael asked, "Is it okay if they call you Dad? Would you prefer they call you Donor?" I was fine with Dad, and that's what they called me when Rachael brought them out to see me from Massachusetts. Today I have relationships with four of my children. My son in Southern California knows I'm his father, but he calls me Mike. More recently, I met Precious, my daughter in Hawaii. She never asked; she just called me Dad.

I assumed 99 percent of people who bought donor sperm would be infertile couples and that the kids would already have fathers. I didn't anticipate so many single moms. Of my known kids, none of them has a dad. Most of them don't have living grandfathers or uncles or any men in their lives, really.

A lot of men out there get married, have children, raise them for a year, and then take off. They are still very much these kids' fathers, even if another man moves in and takes over. The biological father could be a deadbeat dad, but he's still a dad. He could be an awful dad, but he's still a dad. Now I'm a donor dad, or an absentee dad. But for these kids, even though I don't live with them, or even near most of them, and I don't pick them up from school or help them with their homework, I'm the only dad they know. And the mothers...until now, they had been complete strangers to me. But I haven't been a complete stranger to them. They chose me. Granted, all I was to them was a donor profile and a tape recording, but that alone creates a persona in their minds. They carried their...my...our children, and of course they are madly in love with them, so the donor becomes a part of all that intense emotion. I think some of the moms have some issues, not with me, but with one another. I don't want to say there is a tug-of-war over my time, because no one has been demanding. But there is definitely tension.

All of our names are now off the Donor Sibling Registry. The moms and I need to take a breather to figure out how I can accommodate the kids I know of, because there's always the chance that another one might turn up. That doesn't mean that the kids I don't know yet aren't entitled to meet their father, but I don't necessarily want 50 kids in my life either. I'm eventually going to have so many little families that I won't be able to afford to spend airfare and a week off to visit every one of them. It might have to be one or two kids a year, one or two

kids the next year, and then, depending on how many I have, come back around. At this point it's hard to know what's fair.

I was really burned by my first marriage, and I thought I'd never have a family—I thought I'd missed my chance. Now I have all these kids to add meaning and purpose to my life. I can't see them or talk to them over the phone without smiling or busting out laughing.

What I miss is waking up with them on Christmas and watching them opening their presents and believing in Santa Claus. If I'm lucky, I'll catch one of them on Christmas who still believes in Santa, but maybe not. I also realize that some guy could come in and marry one of these women, and I could be squeezed out. I would miss them, but my primary concern is for my children's happiness. If some great guy comes in and it's good for them, then I am happy for them. I absolutely love it when my kids come to stay with me. But I'm also okay when they leave.

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