



Lead Stories

Regulating the 'marketplace of children'

FAMILY | Conceived by donated sperm or egg, some adult children are calling for regulation of third-party reproduction

By DANIEL JAMES DEVINE
Posted March 9, 2015, 11:45 a.m.



©iStockPhoto.com/Robert Churchill

Alana Newman was 5 years old when she learned she was not biologically related to her dad. Her parents, unable to conceive, had sought help from an anonymous sperm donor. They didn't know his name and had no way of contacting him.

Growing up, Newman could only vaguely make out his face when she looked in the mirror.

Her mom and nonbiological dad later divorced. When Newman turned 20, she decided to donate her eggs to a fertility clinic in San Francisco. It felt like a connection to her anonymous dad, and seemed like an easy way to earn an advertised \$8,000. By being an "open identity" donor, she thought she'd be doing a good deed and improving the system —giving any children born using her eggs the option of one day contacting her, if they chose.

When she learned later one of her eggs had become a little boy, she began having second thoughts: *What if I never meet him?*

Today Newman, 28, believes she essentially sold her own child. She views the sperm and egg donation industry as unethical.

"It's really a marketplace of children," she said. "It doesn't matter if nice people are doing



Alana Newman

Handout

it.”

An estimated 30,000 to 60,000 donor-conceived children are born in the United States each year. But those figures are an educated guess, since donations and births are not tracked. As donor-conceived children have grown to adulthood, some have expressed curiosity about their biological origins, or consternation at being separated from biological parents before conception. Some adult children and parents are advocating for industry regulation and the end of anonymous donation.

Newman, who lives in Louisiana, started a website called **Anonymous Us** [<http://anonymousus.org/index.php>] that gives donor-conceived children, parents, and donors a place to share their stories. Well over 300 stories and poems have been posted anonymously to the site since its launch in 2011. A common theme among donor-conceived children, Newman said, is a desire to see or learn about their biological mother or father: “You can’t get away from your parents. You inhabit their body.”

“If you donated sperm about 18 to 20 years ago to two gay women, I could be your daughter,” wrote [<http://anonymousus.org/stories/story.php?sid=1708#.VP2bpkZHMnW>] one person on Anonymous Us last year. “When you walked away, you denied me the chance of ever knowing you and loving you, and you denied yourself the chance to know and love your child.”

Another wrote [<http://anonymousus.org/stories/story.php?sid=1633#.VP2bqEZHMnW>] : “It seems odd and horrible at the same time that two people who have never even laid eyes on each other have a child. I hate that my dad got paid. I hate that he was probably just some guy who was broke and needed a little bit of pocket cash. ... I hear people remark that us donor kids should just be happy that we’re here. It’s not that I’m not grateful to be alive, but my life is hampered by this.”

One survey, published in *Human Reproduction* in 2011, found that 82 percent of children conceived by sperm donation wanted to contact their biological father. Top reasons

included learning his looks, ancestry, and medical history.

Some of those children expressed disappointment their parents withheld the truth about their conception. “[My parents] allowed me to live with a secret that was toxic to them and detrimental to my mental health,” said one survey respondent.

In a 2008 survey of 485 adult children conceived by sperm donation, published with the title “**My Daddy’s Name is Donor** [http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/Donor_FINAL.pdf] ,” 65 percent of respondents agreed, “My sperm donor is half of who I am.” Forty-five percent agreed that, “It bothers me that money was exchanged in order to conceive me,” and about half said they felt sad when they saw friends with their biological mothers and fathers. Donor-conceived children were also significantly more likely to report mental health problems, delinquency, and substance abuse than children raised by biological parents.

Although 61 percent of donor-conceived children viewed the practice of donor conception positively (and 20 percent had become donors or surrogates themselves), about two-thirds said donor children have a right to form a relationship with their biological half-siblings.

But 42 percent said they did not want a relationship with their sperm donor.

“My moms, my brother, and I. That’s my family,” **wrote another person** [<http://anonymousus.org/stories/story.php?sid=1660#.VP2eWkZHMnW>] at Anonymous Us. “My donor is not my family. ... Regardless of his reason for donating, I’m glad he did, but I have very little, if any, desire to meet him.”

Newman said some children’s opinions about donation change over time, as hers did: “People can harbor emotions that they don’t feel free to express for years and years and years.”

Wendy Kramer sought the help of a sperm donor when she realized, in the late 1980s, that she and her husband were infertile. She gave birth to a boy, Ryan, and became a single mother a year later when she and her husband divorced.

By the time he was 6, Ryan had become adamant about discovering his biological father. “At that point I thought, ‘Oh boy, what have I done?’” Kramer said. She contacted her doctor and her sperm bank, but neither would release any information.

Instead, Kramer and her son decided to start an online group where donors and children could post their information in hopes of finding relatives. After they appeared on *The*

Oprah Winfrey Show in 2003, their online group saw a surge in membership.

Today, the **Donor Sibling Registry** [<https://www.donorsiblingregistry.com/>] has 45,000 members from more than 40 countries, including donors, parents, and offspring. (About half of the parents are single mothers, and about a third identify as LGBT.) As of early March, 12,000 people have found their genetic child, parent, or half-sibling on the site.



Handout

Wendy Kramer and her son, Ryan.

“My son now knows of six half-sisters, and he’s also found and connected with his biological father—my formerly anonymous sperm donor,” Kramer said. Ryan, now 24, can’t keep in touch with three of his half-sisters, however: Their parents have either forbidden contact or haven’t yet told them they are donor-conceived. “This has made us huge proponents for openness and honesty in families, and honoring a child’s right to be curious about their genetic relatives,” Kramer said.

Although she doesn’t advocate for ending sperm and egg donation altogether, Kramer believes the donation industry in its current state is “unethical and irresponsible.” She wants anonymous donation outlawed in the United States. (The United Kingdom, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, and some Australian states already require donors to disclose their identity.)

“It’s like a Wild West,” she said. “Nobody’s watching, so there’s no accurate record-keeping. There’s no updating and sharing of medical information.”

The Donor Sibling Registry has more than 35 groups containing 16 or more half-siblings. One group contains nearly 200 half-siblings—all children of a single biological father. That particular donor has not yet registered with the site.

In the “My Daddy’s Name is Donor” survey, 46 percent of donor-conceived children agreed with the statement, “When I’m romantically attracted to someone I have worried that we could be unknowingly related.”

Kramer advises parents not to use an anonymous donor: “It might be more comfortable for you now, but it won’t be for your child.”

Parents who have used egg or sperm donation should expect their children to be curious about their biological parent, she said, adding it's harmful to keep secrets: "We expect honesty from our children, so we owe them that same honesty about their origins."

1

2



Daniel James Devine

Daniel is a reporter for WORLD who covers science, technology, and other topics in the Midwest from his home base in Indiana. Follow Daniel on Twitter [@DanJamDevine](https://twitter.com/DanJamDevine) [<https://twitter.com/DanJamDevine>].

Copyright © 2015 WORLD News Group. All rights reserved.

Articles may not be reproduced without permission.