

A New Openness For Donor Kids About Their Biology

by JENNIFER LUDDEN



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Marisa Penaloza/NPR

Tina and Patrick Gulbrandson, with their daughter, Waverly.

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First in a two-part report.

Women inseminated with a donor's sperm used to be advised to *tell no one*. Go home, doctors said, make love to your husband and pretend that worked. But in a trend that mirrors that of adoption — from secrecy to openness — more parents now *do* plan to tell such children how they were conceived and are seeking advice on how best to do that.

Tina Gulbrandson understands the temptation of secrecy. She felt stigma and pain when she

needed to use another woman's eggs to get pregnant.

"You feel incompetent," she says. "You feel like you failed, as a woman."

Gulbrandson and her husband, Patrick, knew no one in their Maryland suburb who'd used donor eggs. Still, they decided to be open about it. "It's sort of a grieving process and talking about it makes it easier," she says. "And it lets other people know that there are other couples going through this, and that it is OK."

As she speaks, her 7-month-old daughter plays happily on a blanket full of toys. Waverly is a blue-eyed beauty and proof, says Gulbrandson, that the difficulties of her fertility treatment were worth it.

Gay and lesbian couples have pioneered openness about using donors, many even forming relationships with their child's biological parent. After all, same-sex parenthood, as well as single parenthood, raises the obvious question. But today, when one in every 100 babies in the U.S. is created through some form of in vitro fertilization, or IVF, even many heterosexual couples like the Gulbrandsons plan to tell their children this modern-day version of the facts of life.

"Honestly, 10 years from now it's not going to matter," Patrick Gulbrandson says. "More than likely some of her classmates are going to be IVF babies."

Tina Gulbrandson notes that by talking about their situation, they've befriended other couples with babies conceived by sperm donation.

"They're going to grow up together," she says, "so they're going to have that in common."

Exactly *when* they'll sit their daughter down and explain

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- Psychologist Elaine Gordon

that half her genes are from a stranger? They say they'll play that by ear. But a growing body of research suggests earlier is better.

"You never want to sit a pre-adolescent down and say, 'We have something to tell you,'" says psychologist Elaine Gordon. "That's probably about the worst time to tell a child."

Gordon, who counsels donor-recipient couples in California, says keeping this secret from a child can be toxic.

"They don't understand why they were not told, why the information was kept from them," Gordon says. "So it's the secret that they're upset about, not the information necessarily."

And if you don't tell them? Don't be so sure they won't find out anyway.

The [Sperm Bank of California](#) works with many same-sex couples and has pioneered open-donor conception. Its research finds many donor-conceived people want to know more about their donor.

Top 3 Reasons Children Search For Their Donors

Curiosity about donor characteristics

Wanting to meet the donor

Medical reasons

Very few reported they wanted to form a relationship with the donor.

Source: "Experiences of Offspring Searching for and Contacting Their Donor Siblings and Donor" in the journal, *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*

"It happens all the time," says Wendy Kramer, who runs the [Donor Sibling Registry](#), a Web site set up to help the children of anonymous sperm donors find each other. Kramer frequently hears from children who found out about their conception accidentally.

"They found a file in a drawer," she says. "They had a blood test. Drunk Aunt Sally told them."

Gordon says this happens because parents struggle with disclosure, afraid it will erode the bond with their child or afraid they'll be rejected. She says research doesn't prove that and advises telling even toddlers about the many ways families are created today. There's a growing market of books on different animals living together. Gordon has her own, *Mommy, Did I Grow In Your Tummy?*

"And by the time they're old enough to understand biology, egg and sperm, which is around 7 years old, they'll say, 'Oh, Mommy got an egg.' So what you want to do is not make it a big deal," she says.

But Kramer cautions people on her donor Web site not to downplay a donor's connection either.

"I've heard parents say, and this is what they tell their children, 'Oh it was just a piece of genetic material. It was just a donated cell.'"

The message is well-intentioned, she says: We love you, that's all that matters. But Kramer has surveyed hundreds of donor families and says that approach can make children feel they're betraying parents if they later want to explore their biological heritage.

So what will happen if baby Waverly grows up to be curious about her anonymous donor mother? The Gulbrandsons say they'll be prepared.

"She will have access to the Internet, and she will be able to do whatever research she wants," Patrick Gulbrandson says.

Tina Gulbrandson adds they would probably also explain that "our donor did this to help other people. She didn't do it to be found or to know later on down the road that she has children out there."

That will no doubt be explanation enough for many children conceived this way. But not all of them.

In Sunday's report, we'll hear from some who believe they have the right to know who their donor is.

This story was produced for broadcast by Marisa Penaloza.