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June 9, 2008

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[You Can Take the Sperm Out of the Man, But Can You Take the Man Out of the Sperm?](#)

Posted June 5, 2008 | 04:54 PM (EST)

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So, *can* you take the man out of the sperm? Judging from last week's news that [Clay Aiken got someone pregnant](#), you sure can! (Sorry, just couldn't resist the easy joke.)

Last week was sperm central, what with Aiken's news (he's reportedly the known donor for a single friend of his) and [Newsweek's](#) story on the increasing openness of the sperm-bank biz.

Traditionally, many people who have gone to sperm banks have indeed wanted to take the man out of the sperm, preferring to pretend that what they're buying is just a "gamete," which came from, well, the gamete factory, not from a living, breathing man whose personality and looks they may find practically duplicated in their child.

This always makes me think of my childhood visits to my grandfather's dairy farm. Often I'd bring a friend, and almost invariably the friend wouldn't want to drink milk after she'd witnessed the milking parlor in action and seen that milk comes from -- ewww! COWS! Cow's *breasts*, no less. Isn't it supposed to come from cartons made at the milk factory?

Reality check: Milk comes, not from factories, but from the rubbery teats and downy udders of mud-crusting, fly-swatting, cud-chewing cows. And sperm? Even the frozen, anonymous-donor kind comes from actual real men. Men whose identities may well be of keen interest to their offspring. Aren't most people, whether adopted, donor-conceived or otherwise, curious to know where they came from? [Research](#) says yes.

In the old days, couples with male infertility were once advised by their doctors to lie to their donor-conceived children. There's a mom and a dad, why get technical? But the truth has a way of coming out, and some of those lied-to kids are pretty angry.

Nowadays, single moms by choice and lesbian couples who conceive with donor sperm have less motivation to engage in the pretense, since they don't have husbands to pass off as the bio-dad. As a result, about 25 years ago, the progressive, nonprofit [Sperm Bank of California](#) started to offer "identity-release" donors, and another small, progressive San Francisco-area bank, [Pacific Reproductive Services](#) (the one I used) soon followed suit. Now, due in part to laws in the U.K. and Australia that require open-identity donors, many banks are now offering open-identity as an option. These donors agree to release their identities to any offspring, if the offspring request it once they turn 18.

Despite this growing trend, many would-be parents still want to think of sperm donation as a purely technological transaction, with no human connection. For some lesbian couples, since there are two parents, it can be appealing to pretend, on some level, that there was no father. Infertile

men, understandably, would rather keep their condition private. Even for some single moms by choice, it can feel threatening to acknowledge the donor. He won't ever have legal rights, but what of the child's potential emotional interest in him? And procreating with a perfect stranger? Like milk coming from udders, it's uncomfortable to think about.

But life is messy. And as high-tech as you make it, you can't depersonalize conception. If a baby comes out nine months later, he's going to be the product of two human beings. Love makes a family, absolutely. Single-parent families, gay families, adoptive families, families with infertile dads -- they can all be terrific. Still, every kid has a biological mother and father. And most kids are curious about their biological heritage. Don't they have a right to know, if it's possible?

A donor-conceived child may not feel the need to have a relationship with his biological father - -most don't, according to [the studies I've seen](#). And in my opinion, it's potentially damaging to encourage such fantasies. Even if the donor has agreed to release his identity to the child at age 18, who knows what will happen? He may be dead by then. He may have changed his mind. Or he may not have the interest or emotional capacity to get to know a bunch of strangers to whom he donated his genes.

But although an anonymous-donor-conceived child may not have a dad, he does have a father. And according to experts, most donor-conceived kids are curious about where they came from. I hope the "sperm-bank biz," as *Newsweek* called it, continues to become more and more open, and that more donors are brave and altruistic enough to agree to release their identities to the kids who are curious.

Personally, I never liked the extreme anonymity of the sperm industry -- though I do like the legal and emotional safety of it. In becoming a single mom, I wanted an involved, known donor (like Aiken has agreed to be for his pal). But when two close friends said no, I wasn't willing to pick just anyone and risk years of legal battles and heartache for all parties if it didn't work out. In doing research for [my book on single mothers by choice](#), I found one egg-donation service where you have the option of meeting the donor in person before making the decision. Other egg banks have folders with pictures and pages of information. I would have gone for that if I could have, but the sperm-bank biz isn't so open.

This isn't about me, though. It's about my son, and about all the donor-conceived kids who grow up to wonder where they came from. "These kids deserve to know the truth," says Wendy Kramer, who, with her donor-conceived son Ryan, started the [Donor Sibling Registry](#). The registry is a website that matches up donor-conceived kids with their donor half-siblings and sometimes with the sperm or egg donor, when they choose to make themselves known. I agree with Wendy--it's about what's best for the kids.

I'm so grateful that my son's donor agreed to be open about his identity, in the likely event that my son is curious and wants to know. Thanks! Whoever you are, for that you are a real hero. Or should I say, a real man.

Louise Sloan is the author of [Knock Yourself Up](#), a mix of memoir and reporting that features the voices of nearly 50 women who have become single moms through donor insemination.

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