



Children born from sperm donation face questions, search for answers

By Michelle Martin
1/12/2006

Our Sunday Visitor

HUNTINGTON, Ind. (Our Sunday Visitor) -- When Ryan Kramer was 2 years old, he started asking about his father. "His words were, 'So, is my dad dead or what?' " said Wendy Kramer, who conceived Ryan with anonymously donated sperm 15 years ago.

She explained the process in very simple terms, and Ryan grew up knowing the circumstances of his birth.

"At that point, I told him about how I wanted him so badly and a doctor helped me out -- without the details. It was always a part of who he was from day one. We're pretty big proponents of disclosure and telling the truth."

By the time Ryan was 10, his curiosity about his background had not abated, and he wanted to know if he had any half brothers or sisters.

That was the spark that led to creation of www.donorsiblingregistry.com, a Web site administered by Wendy Kramer. It has more than 6,600 registered members -- mostly children conceived by donor insemination, but also about 280 sperm donors -- and has made more than 1,250 matches between people conceived with sperm from the same fathers.

Apparently, when it came to his urge to find genetic relatives, Ryan Kramer was not alone.

Natural urge

That comes as no surprise to Pia de Solenni, director of life and women's issues for the Family Research Council.

People have a natural urge to find their roots, she said. But when it comes to the movement of children themselves to search, she said, she is "encouraged."

It's human nature for people to want to find people who look like them, think like them, act like them, de Solenni said.

"They're trying to find out what's common," she said. "They want to find people with the same hair, the same eyes. Even when people start dating or make friends, that's what they do: they look for things in common."

That's what Ryan Kramer wants to find. The picture of him and his mother on the registry Web site shows a tall young man with a mane of blond hair, with

his petite, brunette mother looking up at him.

"I know who my parents are," Wendy Kramer said. "I can look in the mirror and see pieces of my father and my mother. There's this undiscovered, invisible part of him that he's very curious about, that's a piece of the puzzle that's missing. To have the full picture -- Where did I get this blond hair? And why do I think like an engineer? -- that's what he's looking for."

Kramer fully supports her son's right to find out as much as he can about his heritage, but acknowledges that the idea that he would want to know never occurred to her when he was conceived. At the time, she was married, and she and her husband had just found out they couldn't conceive naturally. Their first option was to look for a sperm donor.

"I thought, 'If my husband can't, maybe I still can,' " she said. "Adoption was more expensive, a much longer process. Once we decided to do it, I was pregnant within two weeks. I got to be pregnant, to carry a child, to go through labor and delivery."

But the couple divorced, and Kramer's ex-husband is no longer in contact with her son.

Unequal footing

De Solenni said that one issue raised by donor insemination is the possibility of conflict between the couple, because they are on unequal footing.

For the mother, it is her biological child, and she carries the child through pregnancy and gives birth. The person acting as father has no biological connection, and might have a harder time making an attachment to the child, she said.

Such nontraditional family arrangements often look more at the desires of adults than at the needs of children -- a topic addressed by a new trend in academia, the study of the rights of the child. De Solenni said she has seen more work on the topic in Europe, especially Italy, than in the United States, and that the voice of the Catholic Church was one of the first to weigh in.

"Pope John Paul II said every child has the right to be born out of love, as a result of love. That is taken away from these children," she said.

"Children have a right to a mother and a father who love each other, who love them." She sees the appeal to people having their own children.

"Scientifically, it's kind of fascinating," de Solenni said. "The power that we used to say belonged to God is in the hands of these people, doctors and lab technicians. People don't see how it's going to play out on everyone involved, except for the church," she said. "I think the church foresaw the widespread issues that arise as a result of this -- especially if [the child is] conceived as a result of in-vitro fertilization."

But just as adults yearn for their own biological children, the children feel incomplete without their biological heritage.

"It shows that it's something that people crave," she said. "Two moms, two

dads, it's not just going to work. They need those very real ties. The older you get, the more you see things in yourself and say, where does this come from? It's not all nurture, and we really don't know how much is influenced by nature."

- - -

Michelle Martin writes from Illinois for Our Sunday Visitor newspaper, a Catholic Online Preferred Publishing Partner.