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Health & Science

Donor-Conceived Kids Connect With Half Siblings

by Joseph Shapiro

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Wendy Kramer, shown here with her son, Ryan, started the Donor Sibling Registry, which has helped connect more than 6,236 half siblings and donors with each other. Wendy Kramer

All Things Considered, February 26, 2009 · Parents who've conceived children using a donor's sperm or egg are increasingly tracking down their own children's "donor siblings," according to a study in the journal *Human Reproduction*. These parents and children want to learn more about their genetically linked "half brothers and half sisters," and are curious about possible similarities in appearance and personality.

"It's a new form of family," says sociologist Tabitha Freeman, of the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge in England.

"It's not, perhaps, what people traditionally understand by family — sort of mum, dad, child. And yes, they do describe each other as brothers and sisters."

Freeman says it's often assumed that people who seek out donor information want to learn about their own medical history. But in her study, the main reason people cited was curiosity.

Twenty-seven percent of parents said they wanted to know about similarities in appearance and personality. Eighteen percent of parents said they wanted to give a child a sense of self identity, and another 18 percent said they wanted to give a child a more "secure sense of identity."

Finding Donor Siblings

Most families that use assisted reproduction don't seek out donor siblings. Freeman studied a self-selected group: members of the U.S.-based [Donor Sibling Registry](#).

The registry was started in 2000 by a Colorado mother, Wendy Kramer, who wanted to find siblings for her only child, Ryan. Today, there are more than 20,000 people on the registry and more than 6,000 people have been connected.

Kramer has learned of six half-sisters related to Ryan, who's now 19. He's met one, a girl named Anna. The two families traveled to see each other twice over the last two years and this summer plan to meet two new half sisters that they learned about last year.

Ryan keeps in touch with the girls through e-mails, instant messaging and on Facebook. Freeman says that's typical. And she says the parents of one child often report feeling a connection to the donor siblings of their own children. Kramer says she felt this way when she first met Anna.

"It's kind of weird. I mean, I know Anna is nothing to me," says Kramer. "I'm not related to her but when I saw this little girl who had parts of my son in her, there was an immediate connection to her. And with her mom. I mean, we

hugged each other and we cried."

What Does It Mean To Be Related?

In Freeman's study, the average number of related donor siblings who've found each other was five. But some of those on the registry have 20, 50 or even, in one case, 120 donor siblings.

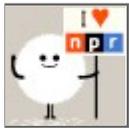
"When you get to a certain number, it's just a very different understanding of what a sibling is," says Freeman. "So we do need research on these bonds between these larger numbers."

Freeman surveyed 791 parents on the registry who were seeking out a donor or donor sibling. Most were usually single mothers (45 percent); lesbian parents (41 percent) and to a lesser extent, heterosexual couples (14 percent).

Almost all reported positive results when they connected with a donor sibling.

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[Barry Y \(Degrassi\)](#) wrote:

I don't mean to be sensationalist here, but I think donor-conceived kids should know who their half siblings are because there is a remote possibility that otherwise they could end up marrying each other (would you marry your half-brother or half-sister?).

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[wendy kramer \(DSR\)](#) wrote:

MarciaL,

The problem is that they can not possibly limit the number of children born to any given donor, because they do not keep track of what children are actually born! They do not update or share medical information and some actually prohibit donors from knowing their donor numbers, so that it is then impossible for them to share and update important medical information with families. In some cases, sperm is continued to be sold even though there are 20, 50 or more than 100 children already born to that particular donor.

The sperm banks are interested in getting people pregnant, keeping donors anonymous and making money. They are not concerned with the issues that we all face after the children are born.

It is a mess - and the industry is in great need of some sort of outside regulation. We need to ask the question publically (like so many other countries have already done) "What is in the best interests of the child being born?". They have been the ones who have not had a voice in the matter. This is why we created the DSR- to help people connect, offer support and community, and to help educate.

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[Marcia Landa \(MarciaL\)](#) wrote:

There's nothing immoral about my granddaughter or her mother who decided to have her. They are a joy in the lives of Grandpa, Grammy, Grandma, Baba, Auntie, Uncle, G-G and many others. Mom has been in touch with a few of the families of half-sibs and when the children are older I expect their lives will be the richer for whatever contact they have. Much appreciation to the anonymous man who made this possible.

I believe the # of children from one donor is now limited to 10.

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[B D \(mocassin\)](#) wrote:

Thank you for posting this story.

I realize that the confidential nature of donors' identity creates a hardship for the reporter, but I would've really have liked to hear their perspective in this story. I'm a donor myself and the DSR has revealed that I have at least 5 children out there somewhere. As a donor, there are very few resources or support networks out there and I often struggled with how or even if I should come forward. It would be nice to know the experiences of other donors. I'm understandably hesitant to make contact because I'm suspect of the parents' intent or the extent of a potential relationship with that many children. Still, like the children and parents, I'm curious about them as well.

I won't say that I never thought that this issue would resurface when I was proving donor samples. However, I did underestimate the impacts of all of those involved including my spouse and family.

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[Scott A \(scotash\)](#) wrote:

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