

SOCIAL NETWORKING

## Registry connects kids who share sperm-donor dads

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- Sitting on his mother's lap at the computer, Charlie Rusco smiled when a picture of his soul mate popped on the screen.

"I call him brother,"

8-year-old Charlie said of Jack, a younger boy he first met in 2005. "We went hiking. We played in his swimming pool. We kind of got along right away."

The only link between Charlie in Kansas and Jack in California is a sperm donor whose name they don't know.

Ditto for their half sisters: Dana in New York, the twins in Colorado, a teenage girl who sends Christmas cards from Los Angeles.

Five families and counting, they mostly stay in touch by way of the Internet, which helped bring them together.

Through an online social network called the Donor Sibling Registry, thousands of people conceived from sperm or egg donations have found the relatives they had always figured were out there.

"It's a fascinating development that goes to the question of what constitutes a 'family' in the 21st century," said David M.J. Lazer of Harvard University, who has studied the legal implications of Web-driven family matchmaking.

"It's meaningful for the people who want to know, 'Who am I and with whom am I connected?'"

Not all donors are eager to help. But some are.



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**Roxanna Rusco with her son, Charlie, who was conceived through a sperm donation and has met his half siblings**

Having made their contributions years ago, anonymously, typically as a way to raise money to get through college, about 1,000 have logged onto the network -- although many still keep their identities secret.

They include an East Coast lawyer named Ben, 31, who asked not to be identified in this story, citing a confidentiality agreement with a clinic. Curious about what his sperm donations as a young man produced, he typed his donor number into the registry.

Ben, who is single, discovered that he has at least 60 children on the registry. All are 6 or younger.

He was amazed at the number.

"It would be a full-time job to keep meaningful conversations with 60 people," he said. "That is the quandary."

He has chosen to meet with a couple of mothers.

He provides any relevant information to the others through anonymous e-mails. "Right now I'm comfortable answering the occasional question," Ben said.

For Charlie's mother, Roxanna Rusco of Topeka, Kan., tracking her only child's half siblings has been all good.

A single mom by choice, she joined the Donor Sibling Registry in 2005 and still hasn't heard from the anonymous donor who made Charlie possible. But more than a third of the man's offspring, known to total 16, have taken the initiative to hook up online.

Rusco learned about the registry on the morning TV news, and just a few days after signing on, she received a message from a mother in New York:

"Your boy has a half brother and a half sister! My daughter is jumping up and down and is very happy to hear about your son."

The Internet has facilitated forms of sleuthing unfathomable 15 or 20 years ago, when sperm donors who helped conceive some of today's online searchers could not have imagined the tools available.

At Fairfax Cryobank in Virginia, one of the nation's largest depositories of donated sperm and egg samples, the whirl of online information-sharing stirs worries about protecting the anonymity of donors and the recipients they help.

"We haven't seen a decline in interest, but our screening process does include a discussion of the Internet," said laboratories manager Michelle Ottey.

Practical reasons exist for half siblings to connect. They can share health information and learn about potential genetic links to any diseases that might arise.

When artificial insemination is performed, fertility clinics provide to patients extensive medical histories and personality profiles of the donors. But often their health issues later in life never get reported to clinics.

For this reason, among others, the Ruscos would be open to someday connecting with Charlie's donor.



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