

Why Wouldn't You Tell? Telling donor-conceived children about their conception

Eric Blyth, CQSW, BA, MA, PhD

Professor of Social Work, University of Huddersfield, England

Adjunct Professor, John Dossetor Health Ethics Centre, University of Alberta

Irene Ryll, RN

Infertility Connection, Edmonton



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Research studies show that while an increasing number of parents of children conceived as a result of donor conception procedures appear to be telling - or planning to tell - their child about their conception (see Golombok et al., 2004; Brewaeys et al., 2005 for an overview), a large proportion of parents choose not to do so. Since the overwhelming majority of parents normally support truth-telling within their families, the decision to conceal the nature of the child's conception - and deception to maintain its concealment - requires explanation.

Factors that appear to influence parents' decisions include pragmatic reasons and the desire to protect the child, the parents and family relationships:

1. They are often advised by clinics not to tell;
2. In the case of donor insemination, disclosure reveals the father's potentially stigmatizing fertility difficulties;
3. Disclosure may alienate the child and damage family relationships between the child and the non-genetically related parent, between the parents and between the family and the extended family;
4. Disclosure may damage the child's self-image;
5. Limited information about the donor means that parents are unable to answer any questions the child may have;
6. Parents do not know how to tell their child;
7. If this information is disclosed to others, they may stigmatize the child and/or the whole family.

There is limited evidence that any of these fears are realized in practice. Indeed, the experience of many parents who have told their children is the converse, that telling strengthens family bonds. We believe that families are best served by children being told about their origins at a very early age. Keeping a secret such as this can itself become an unnecessary burden that may undermine family relationships - especially if the secret is divulged accidentally or inadvertently. Lack of information

about the donor certainly doesn't mean that children shouldn't be told anything. Donor-conceived children are clear about what they think they should be told, as evidenced by this nine-year old (personal communication):

“If you do not tell, you will no longer hold or gain your child’s trust. However if you do tell, there is nothing to be afraid of. You are doing the right thing. In fact, I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know. Do not be afraid. You can’t keep things a secret forever and if/when your child finds out they will want to know if you are hiding anything else.”

One of the strongest reasons for telling is to ensure that the donor-conceived person has accurate information about his or her health history. If they are never told about their donor conception, they will incorrectly assume their family health history is accurate.

Of course, this also means that information about donors and their health history needs to be more comprehensive than is often currently provided by fertility clinics and sperm banks. They need to respond to this challenge for the benefit of the families they are helping to create. †

References

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