

# Surrogacy Families Ten Years On: Relationship with the surrogate, decisions over disclosure and children's understanding of their surrogacy origins

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## Introduction

Despite a recent growth in the practice of surrogacy internationally, very little is known about the nature of the relationship between the commissioning parents and the surrogate mother, parents' disclosure of the surrogacy arrangement to the child and, most importantly, how the children themselves feel about the circumstances of their birth. The present study is the first worldwide to have followed up surrogacy families over time.

## Materials & Methods

A total of 42 families with a child conceived through surrogacy were interviewed about their experiences of surrogacy when their child was aged 1. These families were revisited when the child was aged 3 (N=34), 7 (N=33) and 10 (N=33) years old. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with mothers during each visit, with fathers when the child was aged 1, 7 and 10 years and with the children themselves at ages 7 and 10 years.

Where possible comparisons were carried out between (i) genetic surrogacy (where the surrogate underwent self-insemination using the father's sperm) and gestational surrogacy (where the surrogate underwent IVF treatment using the couple's embryo), and (ii) between families where the surrogate was previously known to the parents (a family member or friend) and families where the surrogate was previously unknown (met through a surrogacy agency).

## Results

### Frequency of contact

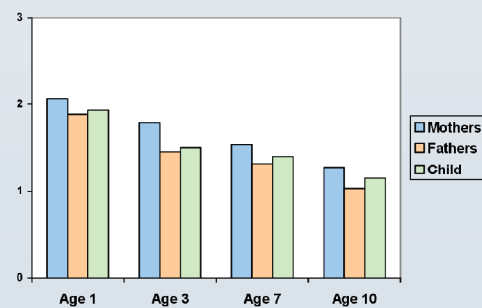


Fig. 1. Frequency of contact with the surrogate during the past year

\*Scale ranges from 0 (no contact) to 4 (weekly contact).

Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were carried out to determine whether contact with the surrogate changed over time and whether this differed according to type of surrogacy (genetic vs. gestational and known vs. unknown). Data for the frequency of contact between family members and the surrogate were reported by the mother.

For mothers and fathers the frequency of contact with the surrogate decreased significantly over time (Mothers:  $F(3, 60) = 10.70, p < .001$ , Fathers:  $F(3, 57) = 11.48, p < .001$ ).

For fathers, there was a significant interaction between frequency of contact and whether or not the surrogate was previously known to the couple ( $F(3, 57) = 5.83, p < .01$ ) with contact decreasing more when the surrogate was previously unknown. There was also a significant interaction for fathers between frequency of contact and whether or not the surrogate was a genetic or gestational carrier with contact declining more rapidly with genetic surrogates ( $F(3, 57) = 3.37, p < .05$ ).

Of the 20 mothers whose children were in contact with the surrogate 5 reported that they would like their child to have more contact with the surrogate and 15 said the amount of contact was just right. None of the mothers reported that they would like less frequent contact between their child and the surrogate.

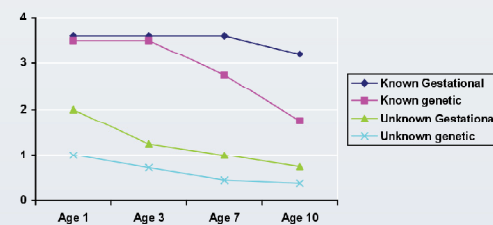


Fig. 2. Frequency of contact between child and surrogate over time

Contact between the child and the surrogate also declined over time ( $F(2.3, 55.2) = 15.94, p < .001$ ). A significant 3-way interaction was observed between frequency of contact, whether the surrogate was previously known or unknown, and whether the surrogate was a genetic or gestational carrier ( $F(2, 18) = 3.77, p < .05$ ). As can be seen in Fig 2, children were in most frequent contact with surrogates who were previously known gestational carriers and in least contact with surrogates who were unknown genetic carriers. Contact declined most between children and known genetic surrogates.

### Relationship Quality

	Age 1		Age 3		Age 7		Age 10	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Mother's relationship with surrogate</b>								
Harmonious relationship	38	90	30	88	26	81	25	76
Dissatisfaction/coldness	4	10	2	6	0	0	2	6
Major conflict/hostility	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	3
No contact	0	0	2	6	5	16	4	13
Total	42	100	34	100	32	100	32	100
<b>Father's relationship with surrogate</b>								
Harmonious relationship	25	80	-	-	18	75	15	68
Dissatisfaction/coldness	3	11	-	-	0	0	1	5
Major conflict/hostility	0	0	-	-	0	0	1	5
No contact	0	0	-	-	6	25	5	23
Total	28	100	-	-	24	100	22	100
<b>Child's relationship with surrogate (reported by mothers)</b>								
Harmonious relationship	-	-	-	-	21	66	24	75
Dissatisfaction/coldness	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0
Major conflict/hostility	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0
No contact	-	-	-	-	11	34	8	25
Total	-	-	-	-	32	100	32	100

Table 1. Mothers, fathers and children's relationship with the surrogate

For parents who were in contact with the surrogate mother, the majority of mothers and fathers reported a harmonious relationship with her. The quality of their relationship with the surrogate did not change significantly as the child grew up. All children at ages 7 and 10 were reported by mothers to have a positive relationship with their surrogate mother.

### Telling the child about surrogacy

At age 1, all 42 families reported that they were planning to tell their child about their surrogacy birth. By age 10, 91% (30) of parents had done so, and the remaining 3 (9%) were still planning to tell. Telling status at each assessment is shown in Table 2. The one family that was uncertain about telling their child when seen at age 3 did not take part in subsequent phases.

	Age 1		Age 3		Age 7		Age 10	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total	0	0	15	44	29	86	30	91
Plans to tell	42	100	18	53	4	12	3	9
Uncertain	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0
Plans not to tell	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	42	100	34	100	33	100	33	100

Table 2. Telling status over time

At age 10, the 19 families who had used genetic surrogacy were asked whether they had told their child about the use of the surrogate's egg; 11 (58%) had done so, 6 (32%) planned to tell in the future and 2 (11%) had decided not to tell.

### Child's views on surrogacy

At age 10, 90% (19) of the 21 children who were interviewed showed some knowledge of their surrogacy birth, illustrated mainly through an awareness of having been born to someone other than their mother:

"Well my Mum's womb, [...] it was a bit broken, so [...] [surrogate] carried me instead of my Mum."

"[Mum] had a bad belly, so I had to go into [surrogate's] tummy [...] so that I could still be born."

Children were positive about their surrogate mother:

"[She] was really kind about [...] carrying me in her tummy."

"I think she helped them to be more happy, because [...] she was going to help them [...] and then they were going to be happy."

One child who had been born using genetic surrogacy spoke about the surrogate's children:

"...we actually have brothers and half sisters, cause [the surrogate]'s children are actually our half brothers and half sisters."

Some children mentioned feeling special and happy:

"I feel special [...] because there's not many other people who are born by a different Mum [...] So I feel really happy."

One child reported being different to other children:

"Well [other children] say something like [...] 'me and my parents are going to a party' and I'm like, 'you're lucky even, like to have proper parents, because like my Mum couldn't have a baby, so I was [...] sort of adopted and sort of not adopted'."

Fourteen children had seen their surrogate in the past year and, of these, most (93%, 13) reported that they liked her. Only 1 felt ambivalent towards her. Five children (36%) reported being happy with their level of contact with the surrogate whereas the majority (64%, 9) said that they would like to see her more often.

## Conclusions

This is the first prospective study of the experiences of surrogacy from the perspective of the commissioning parents and the child.

- The majority of families maintain a good relationship with their surrogate over the course of the first 10 years of the child's life thus allaying commonly voiced concerns that this relationship would present difficulties as the child grows up.
- The frequency of contact with the surrogate decreased over time, and depended on whether or not the surrogate was previously known to the couple and on whether she was a genetic or gestational carrier. Children were in most frequent contact with previously known gestational carriers, i.e. family and friends who had carried the intending parents' embryo rather than previously unknown surrogates.
- In contrast to families who use gamete donation to have a child, this study shows that families who use surrogacy are more open with the child about their use of assisted reproduction. However, just under half of those who were involved in genetic surrogacy had not disclosed the use of the donor's egg and thus the child was unaware that the surrogate was their genetic mother.
- For children who had been told about the surrogacy, most showed an understanding of surrogacy by age 10. The majority of those who were in contact with their surrogate had positive attitudes towards their surrogate mother.

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