

Paid surrogacy will work here if we do it with care

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Parents going through surrogacy, donor conception and even something as basic as IVF sometimes lose sight that they're going to end up with an actual child, not just a baby, writes Alice Clarke.

Picture: Thinkstock

WITH the news this week of another Australian couple abandoning a baby overseas, it's time to talk seriously about surrogacy and law reform.

This latest case, uncovered by the ABC, is reminiscent of last year's high-profile Baby Gammy case, but has some key differences: this abandonment happened in 2012, the baby boy was healthy and it was arranged for him to be adopted out to another family, rather than leaving the, presumably impoverished, surrogate holding the baby.

But what both these stories have in common is that the commissioning parents spent a lot of money and effort to buy children, without considering or caring about what would happen if something went wrong. In this case, the family abandoned the boy and only took the girl because they said they couldn't afford a second child, which, considering the family could afford commercial surrogacy, raises some red flags.

In 1988, before I grew up and became a person, I was known as Baby Alice. Children in the media can get the moniker of “Baby First Name” because of something very good, or something very bad. Luckily, I was “Baby Alice” for a good reason: I had parents who wanted a child so much, and have such a supportive family, that I became Australia’s first IVF surrogate child and the second in the world.

Even in those early days, my parents thought through every contingency. As is often the case, two embryos were transferred, so they had to consider what they’d do if there were two of me, or what if one or both of us was severely disabled. They decided that they would love and care for their children no matter how many, how healthy or unbearably awesome they happened to be.

They also worked out that even if my aunt Linda (my intensive babysitter/surrogate) discovered she couldn’t give up the baby, that they would simply dote on their new niece and swallow their disappointment.

Linda wasn’t paid to have me; she was in it for the adventure, another experience of childbirth and to gain a fairly fantastic niece.

For a long time, I thought that altruistic surrogacy was the only way to go, but my stance has evolved. If you don’t treat the child you commissioned as a commodity, but instead as a child that you love, and you’re open and honest about the entire process from the beginning, there is no reason for that child to be adversely affected by their origin.

And, frankly, it’s unfair that the women who are risking the most in this situation aren’t allowed to be compensated in Victoria for their potentially life-threatening act of generosity.

Australia needs to catch up with the rest of the world and introduce national surrogacy laws that allow for commercial surrogacy in a safe, regulated environment. It needs to happen soon, but since there wasn’t a legal framework for surrogacy in Victoria until I was 20, I won’t hold my breath.

More than that, though, we need to talk about how parents going through surrogacy, donor conception and even something as basic as IVF sometimes lose sight of the fact they’re going to end up with an actual child, not just a baby. Those processes take years and so often I see the parents’ dream of a baby start to twist, just slightly. It makes sense: the process is long and thinking about there being a real person at the end of it, one who will probably live with them for the next 30 years, can be too much, too many dreams to deal with all at once, all the time.

So before anyone embarks on this journey, they need to keep some things in mind: why do they want a baby? Can they handle raising a disabled child?

If they can’t handle having a disabled child, are they and their surrogate OK with aborting the foetus? Are they prepared for the scenario of multiple births? And are they willing to tell their child the whole story of their origin early, often and with pride?

People trying to have a child the regular way should probably think those things through, too, though they really shouldn’t tell their kids about their origin too often: that would be gross.

Surrogacy can be a beautiful, generous thing, but only if we do it mindfully.

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