

For the growing number of children conceived using sperm donors, it's important they hear the truth early and often, experts advise

Since she was a toddler, Barbara Levin's 9-year-old daughter has known she was conceived via a sperm donor. Levin, who lives in Manhattan, believes it was necessary that her daughter understand early where she came from, even if the concept was complex.

"It was important to me that she not grow up thinking that she had a daddy who disappeared or who found her unlovable. I wanted her to know how wanted she was," says Levin, a single mom who self-published "Just the Baby for Me" to help explain donor conception to children. "As a result, she is secure with who she is and doesn't have a gaping hole in her life with unanswered questions."

Not all parents are comfortable disclosing the truth about their child's conception. Each year about 30,000 babies are born in the United States as a result of donor insemination, according to Dr. Cappy Rothman, medical director and founder of the California Cryobank in Los Angeles, considered to be the largest sperm bank in the country.

Until about 10 years ago, the industry was shrouded in such secrecy that, not unlike adopted children in past generations, most donor-conceived offspring rarely found out the truth unless a medical crisis arose. But as the industry has shifted from a 90 percent client base of heterosexual couples to 55 percent single-mothers-by-choice and lesbians, the need to explain the absence of a father has forced the issue, Rothman says.

Telling the truth

As the adoption movement advocates for early disclosure, many in the mental health field are adamant that donor-conceived children including those from donated eggs and embryos) should be told the truth from an early age.

A child's origin should never be a secret," says Leah Klungness, a clinical psychologist in Locust Valley and author of "The Complete Single Mother: Reassuring Answers to Your Most Challenging Concerns" (Adams Media, \$16.95). "If you can't imagine yourself telling your child the story of their conception, then maybe this is not the right choice for you."

In an e-mail interview, Barry Stevens of Toronto - an advocate of offspring rights in Canada who produced the award-winning documentary "Offspring," based on his own search for his donor-father - says there are risks to secrecy.

"If you don't tell the truth, the child will be at risk for health problems they don't anticipate," he says. "Or they may worry about health problems they don't need to. I know of one case where an artificially conceived person decided not to have kids because she feared [passing on] her father's disease, when in fact he had no relationship to her biologically."

In addition, he says, since one donor can father numerous children, intermarriage is a danger, and unwitting marriage between same-donor siblings has occurred.

Not to mention that, psychologically, it's far better for donor-conceived children to hear the truth directly from their parents, rather than find out on their own, Stevens argues.

"If they find out on their own, when they realize you've withheld this information, your bond of trust will be broken," says Klungness. "And it won't be because of the donor insemination, but because you were dishonest."

Dr. Shari Lusskin, director of reproductive psychiatry at NYU Medical Center, agrees that the age of anonymity is over. "As assisted reproductive technology becomes more common, it's also becoming less disruptive to let a child know their conception was assisted," she says. "How you do it is personal and may require the help of a mental health professional. But the earlier a child knows, the less traumatic to them it will be."

'It was worth it'

Lusskin says that parents are often reluctant to disclose the truth if they feel in some way they failed because they needed assistance. This is particularly true for heterosexual males.

"A lot of men worry that their child will no longer think of them as their father," says Joanna Scheib, who studies the psycho-social issues related to donor insemination at the Sperm Bank of California in Berkeley, where she is research director. "But in our research we've never heard of a child who regretted the truth. When they learn of their origins, they tend to love their father more because they understand what extent he went through to have them."

In fact, it is this point that experts recommend parents stress. For Chris Lichten of Greenlawn, who with his ex-wife, Cynthia Delehanty of Huntington Station, had twin daughters 11 years ago, that was the most important factor.

"We experienced three years of infertility and two miscarriages before conceiving twins through a sperm donor," says Lichten. "We went through so much to have them. It was tough for me that I couldn't father them. But I told them it was worth it. They don't consider me any less their father, and I love them no differently."

Fear of the unknown

Scheib says some parents' reluctance comes from the fear that if they don't have information about the donor, they won't be able to answer their child's natural questions about things like the donor's eye color.

"Even if you don't have the info, it's still worth telling. If you have a family secret the child may suspect and attribute it to the wrong reasons, and maybe question what else you may be withholding from them," says Scheib. "If one parent wants to tell and the other doesn't, you have to think about what is in the best interest of the child."

Scheib says the best time to tell your child is as soon as they have language. Adolescence is probably the worst time. "They're already having identity issues, they're hormonal and this would be an emotional upheaval. In that case, if you can hold off until they're older, it's better," she recommends.

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Klungness says it's best to share the story matter-of-factly and age-appropriately. "Make it, 'I have a wonderful story for you,' not something traumatic," she says. "You can tell your child from the beginning this is how you chose to bring them into the world. The father can say that 'the sperm donor may be your biological father, but I'm your daddy.' In a lot of ways, donor insemination is akin to organ donation. You can tell your child this is where your replacement part came from."

Single and lesbian women should provide their child with a socially acceptable way to tell their story, such as, "I chose a special person to help me have you, but not be a daddy who lives with you."

In all cases, be prepared to repeat the story many times over the years at their different developmental stages.

A non-issue

Delehanty says twins Shannon and Alyssa Lichten first learned they were conceived via a sperm donor when they were preschoolers.

"I didn't just tell them once and then let it go. It was gradual over the years," she says. "Each year, as they gained more understanding, I've given them more information. It's a slow process, but I was afraid if I didn't do it that way, it would hit them too hard someday. I put myself in their place. How would I feel if I accidentally found out something like that? And Shannon doesn't look like me or my ex-husband, so she'd be suspicious if I hadn't told her."

Scheib says her research shows that the majority of kids who were told early accepted the information and incorporated it into their lives. That concurs with the experience of a South Shore single mother. She says the truth of her conception is a non-issue in her 17-year-old daughter's life.

"She's known about how she came into my life from an early age," says the mother, who asked not to be named. "And while there was a time when she first started school it was hard for her not to have a father in the family, over the years she's known so many single-parent families that it doesn't bother her. And she's well adjusted and busy with her life, so the topic of the donor doesn't even come up."

Need some advice?

LOOKING FOR DAD

Once donor-conceived children know the truth, they may ask to learn more about the donor. How much information is available can depend on which sperm bank you used. Barbara Levin of Manhattan says her daughter knows she has a file on the donor, with details about his appearance and interests.

"When she was 8, she asked to look at it," Levin says. "She found out details about his hair color and freckles and musical ability and hobbies. And when she'd had enough, she stopped. I don't give her more information than she's ready to handle."

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Once children reach 18, they are legally able to search for the sperm donor. All that is needed is the donor number and the donor facility. Whether or not the donor wants to be contacted depends on arrangements he made at the time of the donation.

If a child is asking for contact, parents should help him or her determine what they hope to get out of it, says Leah Klungness, a Locust Valley psychologist. Is it to satisfy their curiosity? Or do they hope this person will have instant love for them?

"They may have a fantasy that in all likelihood will leave them disappointed," she says. "A donor who didn't agree to be contacted in the beginning may not want to complicate his life."

Further, if your child wants to contact half-siblings who may share the same donor, Klungness recommends finding out what they expect of these siblings. "Is it just that they want to know if they have any? ... The truth is that just because a person shares half your biology doesn't mean you'll be instant friends."

As for the donors, while most want anonymity, some would be happy to hear from children they fathered. A 44-year-old Manhattan business owner, who says he donated sperm for 33 successful pregnancies between 15 and 18 years ago, says he didn't give it a second thought at the time. But about five years ago, when he read an article about stem cells and donor-conceived children, he wrote to the sperm bank to let them know he'd be willing to be contacted by his biological children.

"When I realized that some day they may need to contact me for stem cells ... or something to save their life, I thought about it differently," said the single man, who asked not to be named. "If they want to contact me, I'd be happy to meet them. I'd be curious to see if they share any of my family's personality traits. But I wouldn't do it without their parents' permission. I wouldn't want to disrupt the family they have." - Liza N. Burby

FOR HELP

The donor sibling registry at www.donorsibling

registry.com can help those 18 and older - or kids who have parental permission - to find others who shared the same donor. The California Cryobank also has a sibling registry at www.cryobank.com.