

FACTSHEET



Sharing information with your children about assisted conception

By Senior Fertility Counsellor Tracey Sainsbury AMBICA

Research over the past twenty years has promoted openness and transparency in donor conception and peer support from support organisations such as the Donor Conception network have proved invaluable in providing resources for children from around the age of 3. But often the reasons why this is so are not shared.

There is also a lot less research (if any) in to sharing information with children conceived with assisted conception using their own gametes. When you're thinking about trying to conceive the thought of actually achieving a pregnancy, or having a child and of sharing information can feel a very long way off and something that you'll think about at a later date if you get that far.

We acknowledge that a parent's face is their child's mirror; showing a child how to interpret themselves in relation to the world around them. Comfiness is key around assisted and donor conception. If the parents are comfortable and open to questioning around their child's early beginnings then they promote comfiness for their child too.

The Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority (HFEA) regulatory framework around assisted conception aims to promote a positive outcome for all involved parties; all clinics licensed by the HFEA are required to ensure that counselling is available for anyone trying to conceive with assistance around the implications of their conception decisions.

Counselling is hopefully provided by a BICA Accredited Counsellor and provides an autonomous space to explore the impact of treatment, but though available to everyone is most often only mandatory if you are using donor conception. Specialist fertility counselling helps to explore your situation as you try to conceive but also looks in to the future too, for you and your partner if you have one, your wider family and friends close to you and again most importantly for any child conceived with donor assistance.

If you became a parent through adoption many hours, days, sometimes weeks are spent acknowledging the need to be comfortable in talking about and sharing information about a child's life prior to adoption; learning how to validate that any thought or feeling is OK and that love from a parent is unconditional. With implications counselling around assisted conception many clinics provide a one off 50-minute appointment, there's a lot to fit in! Donor conception is very different, no one adopts an egg, sperm or embryo. Donors donate to enable parents to parent. But the thoughts and feelings around the impact of infertility may be unacknowledged if counselling is not attended as the focus is on getting pregnant and moving on in to family life.

Parents who may see infertility as shameful or embarrassing may find it difficult to talk about with their children in the future and unintentionally create a sense of there being something wrong with how they were conceived. To a greater extent parents who conceived with donor conception who see the donor as an absent genetic parent, can promote the same view to their child. Acknowledging that infertility isn't something we have control over and that it's a condition that can be treated successfully, if using donor conception - that the donor, or indeed donors if using double donation or embryo donation, donated altruistically (as they have to in the UK), having passed screening tests to ensure no known detrimental impact on any child conceived with their assistance and being fully aware of the implications of donating, again as they have to be in the UK, then we hope that parents acknowledge that a child may explore whether the donor or donors are genetic/ biological parents and in doing so

provide an opportunity for the parent/s to provide the reassurance that no parent is missing; the donor/s donated the genetic material to enable their parents to parent.

A child at 5 may ask a solo Mum or lesbian Mums, where's my Daddy? An answer - we didn't settle for the wrong Daddy, instead we found the right donor, reinforces the selection/choice involved in donor selection in the modern world. No more need to have staff shortlist as most banks now have on line catalogues for home selection.

Questions around assisted conception for heterosexual couples may not become more frequent until the child is age 8, when the curriculum in schools looks at reproduction and often includes assisted conception techniques.

A life storybook or photo album can help in the simplest form to validate the pathway to parenthood; sharing factual information, for example for the heterosexual couple using donated eggs, starting with a picture of when Mum and Dad first met, knowing they wanted to be together. A photo celebrating the commitment, a wedding, moving in together, it's your story! A photo of the couple at the computer, we tried to make a baby but it didn't work. We explored options and went to see the doctor at the clinic, a photo of you at the clinic or an image taken from their website.

Next back at the computer, the doctor did some tests and everything looked great for growing babies, but to have the best chance of success the doctor said to find the right egg donor. We went on line and found a donor we were comfortable with. This photo reassures Dad didn't meet the donor; they didn't have sex and the baby ten popped in to Mummy's tummy. No one left. The donor had donated to the egg bank to enable people hoping to become parents to try to conceive.

Next an embryo picture if your clinic provides them, you looked like this and were this small (10pt full stop) when you were transferred in to Mummy so she could bring you to life. The beaming smiling selfie with the positive pregnancy test, scan photos and then 8-10 pictures of each year going forwards.

Using the book to talk to your baby from the first months provides opportunities for you to become comfy in talking about eggs, sperm, clinics, and donors too. A child has as much as 80% awareness of non-verbal communication; it's not what you say...it's the way that you say it. The excellent books available for children help to normalize your family album.

For couples not using donor conception this pre-birth version of the more frequently used baby book provides a tool to explore their own fertility, especially in their teenage years; if their parents had assistance to conceive does that mean they will too? A question welcomed by open parents happy to provide reassurance that everyone's fertility is different. There are no guarantees that conception will be easy...or indeed not.

The world continues to change and home DNA kits are currently available in local chemists for less than £100; but we also age, donor conception can be one of those things that it can feel easier, more protective to not talk about. Sadly the number of parents fretting about having not told adult children who worry about letting something slip, more so as the age of onset of dementia approaches seems to be increasing, reinforcing what a burden secrecy around conception can be to keep.

The fear of sharing about assisted conception with your own eggs or sperm may feel less burdensome, but for many people support at the right time can make a huge difference later on.

If you're comfy talking about assisted or donor conception, create a book and share it with your family early, if you're not comfortable speak to your clinic to book a counselling appointment and/or find support from other families via the Donor Conception Network or through a specialist independent counsellor www.bica.net