



Being an egg or sperm donor

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Being an egg or sperm donor

Connections between donors and recipient parents



Photo: Federico Beccari on Unsplash

*The connection that I feel the most is with the mother, and I would love to meet her one day.
(Rachel, id-release egg donor)*

*It's not even about the child, I hope that the parents, or the parent maybe, who opted to go down this route are as fulfilled as they hoped to be and as happy as they hoped to be.
(Louis, id-release sperm donor)*

This leaflet explores an often-overlooked relationship: the connection between donors and their recipients, that is, the parent or parents of the child born from their donation. Many egg and sperm donors in our research felt an important

connection with their recipients. Even donors like Rachel and Louis, quoted above, who donated their eggs and sperm to recipients they had never met, could still feel a significant link with recipients.

Many donors had a strong sense that this connection was something very particular. Many felt a sense of affinity with their recipients. Some donors found this affinity fascinating, leading them to seek out known donation as a way to deepen what they felt was a potentially rewarding connection. Others found this sense of affinity with recipients potentially threatening and complicated, and often these

people preferred to donate as id-release donors via clinics.

This leaflet explores how 'known' donors and 'id-release' donors think about and experience this connection with recipients. The situation in which these two groups of donors donate is very different. Known donors donate to someone they know in some capacity, and so it is up to them and their recipients to create and manage the relationship that develops between them. Most people who donate in UK clinics are 'id-release' donors, however, and they do not know their recipients, and will – potentially – remain unknown forever.

Connections between known donors and recipients

What we refer to as 'known' donation covers a huge variation of 'donor arrangements', from people donating to a friend or sibling, to donating via an online matching service.

Many known donors think very carefully about their connection with the recipient family. Many of the donors in the study found it helpful to discuss with their recipients what they wanted their future relationship to look like. David donated sperm to a lesbian couple he had been loosely acquainted with before the donation. He said:

We met regularly and talked about every possible aspect of what it might mean as a relationship, and it was pretty exhausting. The couple were civil partners so I knew that I wouldn't have any legal guardianship so legally it wasn't that complicated a situation. We drew up quite a short document which was sort of legal, but also kind of defining some of the boundaries of what we thought the relationship would be.

Even after thorough discussions in advance, some donors found that relationships adapted and changed after a child was born. Eliza donated to a friend and felt that the shared experience had brought them closer. Though Eliza and her friend were comfortable talking about the donation, some things were left unsaid. Eliza carefully avoided giving parenting advice that she might have given to other friends, in case it seemed she was overstepping the mark, and many other donors in our research were very sensitive about respecting the parents' role.

James donated to his brother and he also noted that their relationship had changed, although for him it was not a

positive experience. He would have liked to talk to his brother about the donation and about what it meant for family relationships, especially the relationship between his and his brother's children. But he sensed some awkwardness around the subject from his brother and the result was that they did not talk about the donation, and they had drifted apart.

David, Eliza and James were all involved in shaping their connection with their recipients, but their stories show how donors do not wholly control how the relationship pans out. Recipients also play a big part in the relationship too, and donors did perhaps tend to 'fit in' with their recipients wishes for the relationship, even when they themselves would have preferred something a bit different.

Many donors found ways of creating distance between them and their recipients, so that the connection did not intrude on their everyday lives and relationships more than they wanted. Andy, for example, had a good relationship with a lesbian couple he had donated to. They got on well and he visited the family quite regularly. The parents often invited him to stay overnight at their house but this felt a bit too familiar to Andy,

who preferred to stay with his friend nearby.

Other donors also thought of the connection with recipients as something significant, but were quite clear that they did not want their recipients to play a big part in their everyday lives:

I don't want them to be living in my pocket, I don't want them to think that they have to come and see me because I don't want that'. (Paige)

What I don't want to be doing is walking down the street and run into them, do you know what I mean? That would just be awkward. I mean I don't see why we shouldn't be friendly, but I don't want to be bumping into them every five minutes you know, if they live just round the corner from me. (Brendan)

Some donors, like Brendan and Paige, wanted to maintain space between them and their recipients, often out of a feeling that they wanted the recipients to be able to get on with their own lives without feeling obliged to keep up a close relationship with their donor.

Again, maintaining a distant connection is not always straightforward, and Brendan had completely lost touch with some of his recipients after they suddenly stopped emailing.



Photo: Tina Floersch on Unsplash

Relationships between known donors and recipients could change over time: sometimes gradually and sometimes very quickly. Because the connection was seen to be something quite particular, these relationships came with an emotional charge. Sometimes they became deeply rewarding personal connections, but they could also develop into a difficult, even toxic, connection when relationships were at a low ebb.

Ian was an online donor and over 30 children had been born as a result of his donations. He found that his relationship with his recipients had developed in different ways: some families he never heard from again, others kept in touch via social media or email and others he had become much closer to over time. He described how he had been away for the weekend with one family:

I will just join them as an integral part of their family for a weekend. I've gone off fishing with them, one of the lesbian mums loves fishing so I went fishing with her and the two donor kids, we've done hiking together, pub lunches, that sort of stuff.

Ian and this couple clearly enjoyed how their relationship had evolved. Ian noted that he is careful to allow his recipients to be in control of how the relationship develops, and he thought that this approach was the reason that these parents felt comfortable enough to include him in their family.

But we also heard from donors who had experienced deeply problematic relationships with recipients. Abby had donated to two couples and had originally had a very positive relationship with both. Her relationship with one set of recipients then broke down completely after an argument over something a different recipient had posted on Facebook.



Photo: Sunyu Kim on Unsplash

Connections between id-release donors and recipients

The connection between donors and recipients is managed differently in id-release donation. In the UK, a donor's contact details are held by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) and only released on request of the donor-conceived child when they reach the age of 18. There is no option for donors to seek to make contact with recipients, or donor-conceived children.

This policy seems designed to minimise any relationship between donors and recipients but, surprisingly, a sizeable proportion of the id-release donors we spoke to *did* feel a sense of connection with their recipients. Karina said:

I remember I was stood in my kitchen doing the injections for egg retrieval and thinking, 'wow, I really am doing this for strangers'. But it didn't feel like that, especially after retrieval, it didn't feel like I was doing it for strangers.

Maria was an egg share donor who had a picture in her mind of what her recipient looked like, despite never having met her. When she spoke to us, she mused:

I've got like a mental picture that I have in my head of the recipient... Just a sort of general demeanour. I'm curious, I wouldn't mind knowing about her actually. She's quite a small woman with dark brown hair down to her shoulders and she's quite straight. She lives in like a Barratt home, you know that kind of person, a very straight person.

Some id-release donors seemed to find that in the face of this secrecy even tiny scraps of information about their recipients, or little gifts or notes from them, came to have a huge significance. Rachel was moved to tears when she spoke about a treasured letter that she had received from her recipient, passed on via the clinic:

The letter was just wonderful. If the house was on fire it's something I would try and take

because it's something that when my son is older I would like to share with him. She also sent me that necklace and I wore it when I had my son because...that's why I said I would like to meet her more than the baby, I just feel this really strong... I guess I feel like I have an affinity to her in that we have an understanding perhaps of the journey that we've been on.

Id-release donors could also feel powerfully aware that there could come a time when the connection to the recipient was revealed, if the donor-conceived young person chose to make contact. This could be a powerful and very emotional feeling for some donors, such as Rachel.

We did notice differences in how men and women described these feelings of connection with recipients, with egg donors being more likely to talk about a strong personal connection. There are many possible reasons for this. The process of donation is quite different for men and women, leading some egg donors to feel a connection to an imagined recipient even before the donation takes place. And egg-share donation leads some

women to imagine their recipient during her 'parallel' journey through pregnancy and beyond.

It was more common for sperm donors to view donation as a more generalised act to help people out or do a good deed. But we did find some sperm donors who had built a strong personal connection with their recipients through the process of organising home donation outside of clinics.

Conclusions

We saw big variations in the kinds of relationships that donors had with their recipients, and in what the donor connection meant to them. We think it is likely that this variation is affected by: the significance that each donor gives to gifting their egg or sperm, a lot of uncertainty in how we - as a society - think about donors, not wanting to intrude on recipients' family life and the process of donation itself in clinics and outside of clinics.

The stories of known donors, who have experienced these connections in their daily lives in a completely different way to id-release donors, show that the donor-recipient relationship can

develop in different directions. Whatever the degree of contact or the type of relationship, these connections that can ebb and flow, but whatever happens, they are deeply felt by many donors.

There is no guarantee that donors and recipients will become friends or end up with a relationship that feels like family. Even when there is a pre-existing relationship, or when everybody has talked through how it will work, life does not always go to plan, and the connections can change and develop over time.

It is worth remembering that although the examples in our data of relationships between donors and recipients breaking down are all from known donation, this does not mean that identity-release donation is a way to avoid this. The same issues, or different ones, may happen when identity-release donors meet their recipient families in years to come.

About the research

This leaflet is based on research from the 'Curious Connections' project which explored the impact of donating on the everyday lives of donors, their partners and their parents. The research was carried out at the Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives, at the University of Manchester. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Some of the quotations in this leaflet have been edited, and all real names have been changed.

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