

## Genes Make People, People Make Families

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How Heterosexual and Same Sex Couples and Single Parents Can Talk to Their Children about Donor Origins

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*"Ultimately, children become neurotic not from frustrations, but from the lack or loss of societal meaning in these frustrations."*

-Erik H. Erikson

Erik Erikson (1902-1994) was a renowned psychologist who wrote prolifically about child and adolescent development. His theories about identity have been applied to collaborative reproduction to support the importance of providing donor conceived children with information about their donor, as well as to encourage parents to disclose donor origins to their children at an early age. Erikson's work also provides a foundation for how to talk to young children about their donor beginnings and set the stage for healthy family development.

### Helping Children Understand their Donor Origins

Erikson proposes that children can manage frustrations and confusions as long as parents offer their children explanations for their actions and decisions. When parents provide meaning for their children's experiences, children feel secure. Problems likely arise when children do not understand their situation and parents do not intervene to help them.

Current research in collaborative reproduction supports Erikson's ideas. Children who have been told about their donor origins have not rejected the non-genetic parent or responded negatively to the information. Additionally, when children learn about their donor origins at a young age, they seem to have a more positive experience about their donor conception than those who are told later in life. Furthermore, just because people are not told of their donor origins does not mean that they remain unaware. Many donor conceived people report growing up feeling uncomfortable in their family because they knew that information was being withheld. They could not understand their family experience, and nondisclosure seemed to produce significant psychological distress.

Gamete donation allows infertile heterosexual couples, same sex couples, and single individuals to build families. It is a good choice for people who believe that relationships, and not solely genetic connections, form the foundation of a family. When parents talk to their children about their desire to build a family and discuss donor origins in the context of family building, they provide their children with the meaning that is necessary to understand donor conception. Rather than feeling confused and frustrated, these children experience a sense of belonging. They appreciate the emotional bonds that tie them to their parents and create their family, understand their donor origins in relation to their identity, and always know they are loved and celebrated for exactly who they are.

### How Do We Tell Our Family Story?

The disclosure story is similar for heterosexual couples, same sex couples, and single parents. It is based on the idea that it takes genes to make people, but it takes people to make families. I suggest talking to your child about her donor origins from the time she is an infant. Although your child will not comprehend the meaning of your words, when you "practice," you will become more and more comfortable telling the story. By the time your child is old enough to understand, you will have told the story many times and it will be integrated into your family sensibility.

The story for young children is the same for all parents. I am so happy to be your mommy (daddy). I am so grateful that people helped us become a family. Donors are people who help other people build families.

By the time your child is approximately five, the family story becomes more involved. In the following paragraphs I offer suggestions for heterosexual and same sex couples and single parents.

### Heterosexual Couples

This story is told from the perspective of using an egg donor. It can easily be modified for families built through sperm donation.

Mommy and daddy want to tell you the story of building our family. Mommy and daddy knew each other before you were born. We loved each other, cared about each other, trusted each other, and really loved being together. Our feelings about each other were so strong they made us a family. However, mommy and daddy felt we were too small a family and we wanted it to grow. We wanted to be parents and have a family that included a child. We tried and tried to make a baby so that we could grow our family, but it didn't work. We were sad and went to the doctor to get help. The doctor told us that we already had all the ingredients we needed to grow our family. She said we had love, trust, cared about each other, loved being together and had the biggest wish in the world to be parents and have a child. However, the doctor told us that it takes three ingredients to make a baby. It takes something called a sperm, and sperm always come from men although not always from daddies. It takes something called an egg, and eggs always come from women although not always from mommies. And, it takes something called a uterus for a baby to grow in, and this special growing place is always in women but not always in mommies. The doctor told mommy and daddy that even though we had all the ingredients we needed to build our family, we only had two of the three ingredients we needed to make a baby. Daddy had the sperm and mommy had the special place for a baby to grow, but mommy didn't have any eggs. We got very sad because we wanted to become parents and build our family and we were missing something we needed. However, the doctor gave us good news. She told us that it is common for people to be missing an ingredient they need to make a baby, and because it is so common, other men and women know about it and want to help. Men can give some of their sperm to other men who want to be daddies and women can give some of their eggs to other women who want to be mommies. A woman gave mommy and daddy some of her eggs and we were so happy. We always had the ingredients we needed to build a family and now we had all the ingredients we needed to make a baby. We mixed the sperm from daddy with the egg from the woman who helped us. An embryo started to grow, and we put the embryo into mommy's uterus. A baby started to grow inside mommy and that baby was you. We are so thankful that this is our family building story because it was the way that we became your mom and dad. We are so happy that we have you and that we are a family.

### Same Sex Couples

This story is told from the perspective of gay couples. It can easily be modified for lesbian couples.

*We want to tell you the story of how we became a family. Papa and daddy knew each other before you were born. We loved each other, cared about each other, trusted each other, and really loved being together. Our feelings about each other were so strong they made us a family. However, papa and daddy felt we were too small a family and we wanted it to grow. We wanted to be parents and have a family that included a child. We had all the ingredients we needed to grow our family. We had love, trust, cared about each other, loved being together and had the biggest wish in the world to be parents and have a child. However, we knew that we would need the help of other people. Even though we had all the ingredients to grow a family, we were missing some ingredients to make a baby. It takes three ingredients to make a baby. It takes something called sperm, and sperm always come from men, although not always from daddies. It takes something called an egg, and eggs always come from women although not necessarily from mommies. And it takes something called a uterus for a baby to grow in, and this special growing place is always in women. We had the sperm, but we were missing the egg and the uterus. Fortunately, there are people who know that two men who love each other and want to build a family need help becoming daddies. We got help from a woman who gave us the eggs we needed. Another woman offered to help us by carrying our baby in her uterus. Now we had all the ingredients we needed to build a family and all the ingredients we needed to make a baby. We mixed the sperm from daddy with the egg from the woman who helped us. An embryo started to grow and we put the embryo into the other woman's uterus. A baby started to grow and that baby was you. After growing in the woman's uterus for nine months, you were ready to come out. We were right there to hold you. We are so thankful that this is our family building story because it was the way that we became your daddy and papa. We are so happy that we have you and that we are a family.*

### Single Parents

This story is told from the perspective of single mothers. It can easily be modified for single fathers.

*I want to tell you the story of how we became a family. I always knew that I wanted to be a mommy and wanted to grow a family. Some people decide to grow a family with another person that they love and make a family of three. I wanted to build a family of two, just me and my child. I knew that I had all the ingredients that I needed to build a family. I knew I would love to be a mommy and would love to take care of a child. However, I knew that I would need the help of other people. Even though I had all the ingredients I needed to grow a family, I was missing some ingredients I needed to make a baby. It takes three ingredients to make a baby. It takes something called a sperm, and sperm always come from men although not always from daddies. It takes something called an egg, and eggs always come from women although not necessarily from mommies. And, it takes something called a uterus for a baby to grow in, and this special growing place is always in women. I had eggs and a uterus, but I was missing the sperm. Fortunately, there are men who know that women need help becoming mommies. I got help from a man who gave me the sperm I needed. Now I had all the ingredients I needed to build a family and all the ingredients I needed to make a baby. I mixed my egg with the sperm from the man who helped me and a baby started to grow in my uterus. That baby was you. I am so thankful that this is our family building story because it was the way that I became your mommy. I am so happy that I have you and that we are a family.*

When you describe your child's donor conception within the framework of building a family, define family building as distinct from baby making, and separate motherhood and fatherhood from eggs and sperm, you help your child understand his experiences, feel a sense of belonging, and have the knowledge that he is loved for exactly the person he is. Early disclosure allows your child to feel secure within himself and his family.

These disclosure stories are for young children and lay the foundation for healthy child and family development. As your child grows into a teenager and young adult, queries about donor origins will become more complex and include questions about the donor, how the donor is connected to your child and family, and how being donor conceived affects identity. As parents, it is important to encourage your adolescent's curiosity so that he feels free to explore feelings about being a donor conceived person without shame or discomfort. With your help and support your teen will develop a strong and secure sense of self and family.

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