

ON BEING DONOR CONCEIVED

At the Nottingham National Meeting on 11th October about 120 parents were held spellbound for an hour as seven donor conceived young people and adults answered questions that had been pre-submitted by members. We have printed the whole transcription of the recorded session because we couldn't bear to break it up and we wanted everyone to benefit from the candour, articulacy and wit with which the young people spoke. Unfortunately, the often present humour does not translate as well on to the written page, but when the rapt silence was broken in the hall it was often by laughter (or tears from parents)...not a dry eye in the house!
Louise, Co-ordinator of the new Young Donor Conceived Peoples group starts by introducing herself and asking the rest of the panel to do the same.

Louise: Please bear with us if there are a few stutters and stuff like that. First of all I guess we should go along and introduce ourselves and say a bit about our background and also to let you know that the questions we are going to try to answer are from our own personal perspectives. We are not going to try and generalise for every donor conceived person. So I just want you to take into account that these are our personal views and not reflective of anybody else.

So...I am Louise. I am 27 years old. I think I am the oldest. I just get into the upper age boundary for a young person. I'm conceived through donor insemination, so from anonymous sperm donation. I found out when I was 13 years old and I have a younger, naturally conceived brother as well.

Hi. My name is Elspeth. I am 22. I was told by my parents that I was conceived by DI 9 months ago, so it is all quite new to me at the moment. I have got an older brother who was also conceived by sperm donation from a different donor.

My name is Peter. I am 13 years old. My mum had me as a donor by choice. I've always known that I've had a donor father and that I wouldn't be able to trace him. It has never been an issue for me. I just accept it because that's the way it has always been.

I am called Imogen. I am 12 years old, and I found out that I was donor conceived by egg, when I was like 2 or 3. I have got a brother and sister who were also conceived by donor egg.

I am Susannah or Zannah. I am 22. I was conceived through sperm donation and I was told from a very young age. I don't really remember what age. Probably about 2 or 3. I have an older brother who was conceived through donor insemination as well.

Hi. I am Katherine. I am 14. I was conceived by sperm donation. I was told when I was 4. I don't really remember much.

Hi. I am Sam and I am 17 and I have always known and I have got one younger brother who's also conceived by a different donor.

Louise: So the first question that we were asked is:

1) How do you feel about being Donor Conceived and the choice your parents made to use an unknown donor to have a child?

Louise: For me personally, I think my feelings when I was 13, when I first found out were very different to what they are now. Being 13 is quite a volatile time anyway, with just teenager-ish issues. It was a big shock. I never really suspected anything and knowing that my brother was also naturally conceived threw up quite a few issues for me. Just because those links that you've

been making. You assume I was like him for this reason, or like my dad for that reason. You have not got those genetic links anymore. You have to learn to accept that actually, you are still like your dad, and he is still your dad, and you're still like your brother, but those similarities have come from living and loving in a family rather than just assuming it's from genes. So it has been a journey for me. Having an unknown donor (because my records were destroyed), I will never probably know anything about that biological father, if you like. I don't like to call him that, he is a donor to me, but it is still a concern in terms of the genetic stuff that I feel I have a right to know that can never find out.

Elspeth: In fact it is incredibly similar to how I feel. I am still a bit in shock. It was completely out of the blue, my parents telling us, my brother and I, and a lot of confusion. In terms of with the relationship with my parents, a lot of anger, although we are working through that now. And it is just a hundred times better. In terms of the choice my parents made to use an unknown donor to have a child, I'm a bit fascinated by it. There is half of me or half of my genetic make up that is completely unknown, and similar to Louise, never can be for me. It has really thrown up questions of how much of me is genetics, how much is how I have been raised, and how much is just me. It is actually quite reassuring that a lot of me is just me and I'm so like my Dad in a lot of ways. I think that just shows how strong our relationship is.

Peter: To me having an unknown donor doesn't matter, as without this donor, I wouldn't be who I am today. I would be a different person perhaps, and I might even be a girl. (Laughter from audience Louise: God forbid!). It doesn't matter to me. I am who I am. If I had a different donor then I would be someone different. But doesn't matter to me.

Imogen: It does not really matter to me either having a different donor. It means a little bit but it's not that much because I know that I am genetically linked to my dad, but not genetically linked to my mum. So I feel closer to my dad than I do to my mum, but it does not really matter to me that much.

Zannah: It has never been an issue for me at all. It's actually strange being invited here to speak about something that actually is not a big part of life at all. It's always just been that's the way that it is and it's made me grow up knowing that to be honest, blood does not really mean that much. It's about your relationships with people, and a father is someone who is there for you and raises you, and so it has never caused any detriment to my life really. I am lucky to have had a very good mother and father and so I have never wanted to look anywhere else or anything else like that. I am lucky for that.

Katherine: I don't know how I feel about it, because it's something I have always grown up with because I was told so young. When you're young everything's new to you and it is just another piece of information that you just accept. Like "that's ok, it's cool, so can I watch TV now?" Because I have just grown up with it, it has not affected my relationship with either of my parents at all, because I've never known anything really different. I think that's good because if they had told me now then I think I might hate them a little. I am happy with the decision they made because if they hadn't, then I might not have been here...or I might be a boy! So it is something I have always been completely happy with, and I am glad with the decision they made.

Sam: Yeah, I think, like Zannah, because I have always known it just hasn't affected my daily life at all. If I had a choice I probably wouldn't be donor conceived just for my dad really because I think he'd obviously prefer it if he was my biological father. I think if they had used a known donor like a friend of my dad's, it would have put some sort of strain on their friendships so I think the unknown donor part is a good choice to make.

Louise: I think that there are some different issues here that reflect that actually these people who have grown up in general with knowing about their origins right from the word go. They have had that incorporated into their identity from a really young age, whereas with people like me and Elspeth, it is something that you have to learn to incorporate into your identity and to be ok with it.

You can't change it. I think that's why there is a lot of anger in some people that are donor conceived adults that have found out late, is that they have not been able to process that information. I think that hopefully that's a good thing about the Donor Conception Network, is that it does encourage people to be open and honest right from the word go and I don't know about you but I feel that it would have been helpful to know sooner?

Elsbeth: Definitely. From my perspective I would have preferred to know from the word go. However, having spoken to my parents about it, I understand their reasons for not. It was partly due to the advice they were given at the time was not to tell and once they had made that initial decision not to, it was for them a lot about assessing how they thought we would react to the information. They said it came up every few months. "Should we tell now?". In fact a lot of it was to do with just the way my brother and I were growing up and particularly his emotional state, they felt he might not be able to cope with it very well. As he got to an age where perhaps he would have been able to understand but not process it very well. I'm different, I think, I would have been able to deal with it earlier. They do too, but it's about the balance of, you have to consider both of your children and on balance, well, we are both fine. We both still love our parents to pieces and that relationship is never going to change. There's a lot of talking that needs to be done about it, but it's all turned out fine. That again is my personal opinion.

2) How do you explain your family situation to others such as your friends, other children or colleagues at work and what reaction have you had from them?

Sam: It has just being an entirely positive reaction. Yeah, the interesting thing is my Grandmother has always known about it, but my Auntie and Uncle haven't. So I think that raises an interesting question if a child has a right to know then at what point do you cut that off. Does Grandmother has a right to know, does Auntie and Uncle? To be honest I don't really get on with my Auntie and Uncle that well and they live in Australia so they don't really know me that well. They think that biologically they have a nephew so I don't know. I am of the age and my parents have made it clear that I can tell them if I like. I need to bit of a moral dilemma. I don't know whether I should or not.

Katherine: I basically jump at any opportunity to tell people about my conception whether they want to or not, because it is fine. I think my parents were quite cruel in the way that they told my Grandparents about my conception because I think it was a couple of weeks after they told me, they sent me over to my grandparents with the "My Story" book and let me tell my Grandparents myself. Which I think was a little bit mean, but it was. In terms of reactions I've had from friends, most of them have just been like "oh that's weird" but they have never been negative, apart from one unfortunate incident where someone tried to blackmail me with the information. Which didn't really work as it wasn't a secret. Apart from that I've always had, been reacted with a kind of curiosity or really annoying questions like "are you adopted then?" "No!" But I've always had a positive reaction and I don't have any problems about telling anyone about my conception. So it's all good.

Zannah: Yeah, me too. From a young age I've always thought my parents instilled in me that there is absolutely nothing wrong with it. You have a father so there is nothing wrong with it so even if people did give me a negative reaction which I have never had, apart one silly girl which was at school who tried to threaten me saying that "I'll tell the school you don't have a real father". Well you can tell them anything you like because I know that I do, so it doesn't affect me and that is literally the only negative response I've ever had otherwise. When I was younger and still to this day I think it's really cool. It doesn't bother me.

Imogene: I've only told two of my friends because I don't think it is that much of an issue to tell your friends. One of my friends thought I was adopted, but the other one thought it was ok. So it was all right really.

Peter: With my friend, if I can, I'll try to avoid it. They probably know about it but I try to avoid it. Like, there was one incident when I was eleven, and I was talking to three girls in the playground. We were just talking and it came onto the subject about Dads, and I said that I did not have a dad and they said "well you must have a dad". I said "but I don't have a dad". So they said "well did your mum have sex with a blindfold on?" I went "no". I mean, at the time I was quite upset about it and I found it quite disrespectful but they must have said something and gone home that night and talked to their mums and dads about it because the next day they came back and said "can you explain it again?" So I told them and they were quite amazed about the story because it isn't very common. I don't generally get many issues with it because people are just all right with it. They take it on the chin and just say you are still human you're not different or anything. You're still my mate no matter what, so it's all right.

Louise: I think we should say that Peter's from a single parent family so that explains why they said he didn't have a dad.

Louise: I guess for me it's the same who do I tell, who has the right to know, who can really want to know? I have been telling a few people at work just because it has come up in conversation. I think it is an interesting subject. I think it is an ethical debate as well, especially with the anonymity ban. So, I think it is partly now I'm getting older, I am bound to promoting in a way which brings it out into the open and encourages people to think about these issues, because they might be my friends who would go down this route. I am 27 and getting on a bit! It's a time when people are considering having a family of their own and I want them to know that there are other options out there and they are ok. So the reactions I have had have been fine and I found people are really interested in it. Yeah, most of them know that I am coming here today and I think they will ask me how it went and they'll be interested to find out what the answers were.

Elsbeth: I haven't told that many people yet, because I am still going through it myself. I have spoken to people at work about it and they have been incredibly supportive but for me it's still more of an emotional issue rather than a genetic issue if that makes sense. Friends who I have told have mostly been reactions like "ohh...ok". Not knowing what to say all the time really and then again I think that is more to do with the relationship with my parents, how that dynamic could possibly change rather than the actual fact that I'm donor conceived, but mostly people find it really interesting and again, it is a talking point, an ethical issue particularly at work. We can debate about it and the anonymity. In terms of my family, my both sets of grandparents knew and my aunts knew but beyond that it wasn't said as my brother and I did not know. But I am not at the stage where I have spoken that extensively about it.

Louise: I guess as well I might be interesting to know that my dad was very reluctant to talk about it. It was my mum that told me (after they were divorced). He's ok about it now and I've actually encouraged him to talk about it, but my family most of them still don't know. His parents, my paternal Grandparents, passed away without ever knowing that I was not their biological Granddaughter. I don't think it would have mattered for a second, but it would have been quite nice to have had that conversation with them to tell me that it did not matter. Also I had to, well I didn't have to, but it was down to me, my choice, whether my brother knew. So I decided to tell my brother which I don't think I should have been put in that position. If it had been out in the open from the word go, then the family would have known, my parents would have been ok about it and I guess I would not have had that journey to make by myself.

Do you have a sibling that has a different donor to you and if so does that cause any difficulty for you or between you? What if one of you could gain identifiable information about their donor and one of you couldn't?

Sam: My younger brother isn't really interested, he doesn't mind about it at all. So there are not really any difficulties between us. I remember when I was about eleven suddenly realising that he was only technically my half brother which was interesting. So I still think if he found siblings, or if they contacted him in some way or a donor, I would feel frustrated but I would still be happy for

him and try to help him out and whatever he wants to do about that. But I would be slightly jealous I think.

Louise: Katherine, I think you are an only child but what about the siblings....

Katherine: I have 18 half siblings, 12 boys and 6 girls. I got that information a while ago and I keep remembering and going "oh wha". That is another little talking point. But the probability is that most of those 18 don't know that they are donor conceived, then there's no kind of chance of us ever sort of finding each other. But yeah, it's kind of nice to know that there are other people I am related to that are kind of the same age as me. It is interesting to think about what they'd be like and whether they would be like me. It probably isn't genetically true but it feels like I have more in common with them than with the actual donor because the donor is just some guy, but the siblings are actually people my age that may or may not have gone through the same things as me, depending on whether they know or not. I feel more of a connection with those people I don't know than with that one person I don't know...if that makes sense.

Zannah: I have only got one older brother from a different donor and he feels very differently about it than me. Not in a negative way, he just cares even less than me I guess...can't be bothered or whatever. I don't think it's in any negative way. I don't really feel like he would even, he would never consider, he would ever find out something that I wouldn't, as I am the only one who has ever considered or any thought investigating anything. I guess in my situation I've always known that basically it is the completely most unlikely thing in the world that I will ever find my donor or any other half sibling so it hasn't been anything I think about. But like Sam if my brother did find out any information, I would not help but be a bit jealous and stuff as it would be fascinating and interesting.

Imogen: Same as Zannah really as my brother and sister have different donors to me, and they are twins so a bit different for me, but it does not really make that much difference. And they don't care about it really...so that's it.

Louise: Peter you are an only child as well aren't you?

Peter: Yeah, that kind of makes it in a way easier for me but in a way harder for me because I've got no one within close range to talk to about it apart from my mum. I've got no one though I can really connect to but, I mean, it does not really bother me. I'd be interested to find my half siblings because I'm, well, just because I'm curious and nosy I'd be interested to know what they look like, if they would look like me, if they had hobbies like me and I'd just like to know a bit about them. I mean, because I don't want to pester their lives and just constantly be at them, you know like "oh wow, you know! You can play football like me" kind of thing, I'd just be interested.

Louise: I think that the thing is, the likelihood is that we all have half siblings out there; it is just that we will probably never know about them. My brother, although he has not got a different donor to me - but I guess you could assume that my dad is a different type of donor! We are different - he is much more practical and useful than me and I do think that that's a similarity to my dad, which is a shame that I haven't got that. I'd like to be useful at some point in my life! They are mechanics and very hands on and I am not. It is again, how much of that is just natural? Would I be like that if I was my dad's biological daughter? But then the donor I think has possibly made me more academically minded so it has made me escape Swindon...if you've ever been to Swindon, then that's a good thing!

Elspeth: It has not caused any difficulties between my brother and I because really we have only just found out. It was very strange to suddenly discover that we weren't full brother and sister as we had always grown up with. It has not changed anything about our relationship though. It's just we have always been incredibly different. But it just feels that that it's more a sense of self. We are different as people, rather than we have different biological fathers. If he could gain identifiable information about donor or siblings again the same, I think I would be jealous, as I am

fascinated. I am interested but at the same time I think it would be a good thing for him if that is the route he wanted to go down if he wanted to find out.

For those of you who have felt you looked very different in appearance from your non-biological parent, did this make any difference to you or to others?

Louise: I guess I don't really look any different from my brother, so nobody would have guessed or assumed, apart from him being 6 foot 2 and I'm 5 foot 4!

Elsbeth: It is not a noticeable difference, or a striking difference between my dad, and my brother or myself. I don't think anyone would look at us as a family and suddenly strikingly say "You don't look like your dad at all, or you don't look like your brother at all". So it hasn't made a particular difference to me.

Peter: Because I don't have any siblings there is nothing to compare with my siblings but I mean, unfortunately I look like my mum anyway.....no offence....I'm in trouble now! But, I look like my mum and I don't know what my dad looks like...so...well...I vaguely do...I have got some characteristics like him and some characteristics like my mum so, you know, I don't know who my dad is, so I can't say I look like him or not. So I don't really know. It doesn't really affect me at all.

Imogen: I look quite like my mum and my brother but I don't look like my sister as much as I do my mum and my brother. I look like my dad as well because I've got the same colour eyes as him.

Zannah: My dad is actually the shortest of the family. On my mother's side they're Italian, so if I say to people, yes I am a quarter Italian, quarter English, people look at me - 6 foot, blue eyed, blond and say "really?" Which means that a lot of the time, when I can't be bothered to explain the story to people, I'm like, "yeah, I'm Swedish!" It just gets easier to explain the whole thing to people. It just sort of makes it come up in conversation more often. I don't think me and my dad look incredible different or anything but I am just obviously more Scandinavian looking than him, which means it comes up in conversation and I have to explain things, or just lie and say that I am Scandinavian or make up my dream country each time or whatever.

Katherine: The only difference between me and my dad is probably the slight height difference which means that I just get to lean on him! That's the only real difference it makes. It's just a convenience really! I have got the same colour eyes as my dad. It's not really something that's made a difference apart from I take the mick out of him all the time. I lean on him and that's it. It is something people say "how come your dad's so short and how come you're so tall?" Well it's like my mum's tall, and my biological father is 5' 10" apparently, so I guess that's where I get it from. So then I have to explain stuff again, which is fine. I am happy talking about it, but it's annoying my dad's so short!

Zannah: It is just means it constantly comes up in conversation, "oh you're parents must be tall"

Katherine: It is something you can't avoid really, but yeah, it's all good.

Sam: Well the emphatic difference between me and most of the rest of my family does not really bother me at all. If anyone has seen my dad I look totally different from him. About as far as you could possibly...about as big a difference as you could possibly have. My brother...I look kind of like my brother, but he's much better looking! You could definitely tell we were brothers. I think we could definitely pass as full, technically full brothers.

It would be interesting to know have you have thought about contacting your donor by using UKDonorlink.

Louise: Do you know what Donorlink is? It is something for over 18's. It's a website where you can register and do a DNA swab. It encourages donor conceived people, donors and possibly half siblings (so children from the donor's natural family) to join and register their DNA. Then they do like a blind date, mix up things.

Zannah: I'm joined to it. I know the risk is there and that the possibility of finding anything is very low. I thought I might as well. It is pretty much the only thing that there is for me, for people born before the anonymity ban, so fingers crossed.

Louise: (to Sam): Are you thinking about joining?

Sam: Yes. As soon as I am 18 next year I'll definitely join. I'll probably be more interested in meeting half siblings than the donor. I would quite like to find out some information about him, and a photo like circa 1991. That would be really interesting. I am not sure even if I want to meet him. But I don't think he would be a disappointment as I don't really have any expectations. I would quite like it if he was someone totally different from where my parents were coming from, if you know what I mean. Someone with a totally different background, I think that would be really interesting.

Katherine: I've not got that much chance I think in finding siblings because I've been born into a really awkward age gap. I can't remember the dates, but it's before something happened and then after something else happened, and I'm in the middle. So I can't get information I think. It's to do with the HFEA so I just don't like them. The only possibility I've got is signing up to an American donor finding sibling finding site, which is extortionately expensive so.....

Zannah: No, apparently it's not.

Katherine: Oh it's not....sorry. So I guess I will do that now. I would quite like to find out about half siblings. I'd quite like them to go the same route as me in trying to find each other because I think I would have quite liked to have a sibling growing up whether older, just steal things from, or whether younger, just to annoy all the time. It would have been quite nice to have a sibling my own age because my parents are really boring. So yeah...I guess I'll go that route now.

Louise: Peter, Imogen - have you thought of the donor at all?

Imogen: mm....a bit because she was a chocolaholic and I really like chocolate.

Peter: I would be interested but if I was a donor and if I had like 15 kids knocking on my door saying like they're your children I wouldn't be too happy so I would be interested to find out about siblings because I'm just nosy like I said before. I don't know, I would want to know, but I wouldn't want to know. Because if they are, like, a bad character you would know if they have been in trouble. I would not like to think that I was related to someone who had done something wrong. I don't know.

Sam: I quite like that idea of them being a bit of a dodgy character. I think that would be quite exciting.

Zannah: It's all quite voyeuristic. I wonder what they would look like. It is not really about who they are or that you want them to be best friends though is it?

Louise: It's just that annoyance really that we can't find out. I think if you can't find out it makes you want it more.

Katherine: It would be quite cool to say that I have a half sibling who's been in prison, but you don't know so you can't say it, so you don't get kudos for that.

Zannah: You could make up all sorts of stories...

Katherine: You could just lie!

Louise: I have joined Donorlink, just to see if anything comes up, I don't think anything will. That is my only option so I might as well take it.

Elsbeth: I have joined Donorlink as well. I think just to have the choice, even if they do find someone there is still a choice if you go ahead and contact them or not. I am much more interested in half siblings than I am about the donor. I think, similar to Sam, a photo circa 1986, maybe what they do, what they like. But I am not interested in meeting them. But I would be interested in meeting half siblings. Similar to Katherine just so someone around your own age who may have gone through same things and maybe you are a bit like them in certain ways. It would be a way of finding out more about yourself as well.

Louise: I think as well, that part of my reluctance to join Donorlink in the initial stages was to try and separate out why am I doing this? Am I trying to find a father figure and it's not that at all. I do not want to replace my dad but I would just like to find the missing pieces of the puzzle really for me, to see what they are.

6) What information do you think schools should be given about children's donor background?

Louise: Peter shall we start with you?

Peter: I think when you are a little child that they should know, the teacher should know. Because if you are doing like father's day cards or for me, especially father's day cards, and other things like that that are related to perhaps fathers. Everybody else in the class was writing a father's card and say someone called Paul and I was just there sort of there you know. I don't know. I might start making it up to just try and avoid not be different.

Louise: It is not quite the same writing a card to "donor" is it?

Peter: No. As you grow older they give you more options in school. At a lunch time you might be able to make a father's day card and I could take the option not to do it. I think it is important that you don't get put in a position in front of your class or friends that you have to be in a position to explain it. You aren't being in the PSHE lesson and you aren't put in front of the class and said "Wow you are donor (conceived), explain it". I don't want to be in that position. Especially with little children that they don't understand what situation you are in. You shouldn't be put in a situation where you are forced to explain it perhaps.

Louise: Imogen what do you think about schools?

Imogen: I don't think really that they should know because it does not really come up as a big issue. You've got your main parents, so they should be the only ones the school knows about.

Zannah: I don't think it's necessarily a really important thing for schools to know about. I remember being younger and being in first biology lessons and they were being like "this is the way a baby is made". I wanted to put up my hand and say "Actually, there are different ways". I'm pretty special. I found it as a fun thing or whatever. I just think that if anything they should...kids should be told, especially in this day and age. It really isn't often the only way - just mummy and daddy have some sex and have a baby. It's like it does not happen all that often but they should talk about all the different ways that babies come into the world. That should be brought into schools at a young age.

Katherine: I am not really sure about this as I don't really feel that parents should tell schools like "Ooo, it's a secret, hush it up, don't tell them" or I think it should be really that once kids or

children are old enough to make the decision for themselves, I think they should be able to tell who they want. If they don't want the school to know they shouldn't have to have the teachers like looking at them funny or whatever. What Zannah said about the biology lesson, I actually did put my hand up and I was like "Yeah, no!" and then my science teacher deviated to sperm donation and I had to correct him a lot which made me feel good inside. I don't know. I think it should definitely be up to the children whether the schools know or not. I don't think it's particularly something that the schools need to know. It's not something they need to know.

Sam: I think it's fine that the parents should tell the primary schools. I think it's almost their duty to the child, but then at the primary/secondary divide that should be the cut off really, where the responsibility goes over to the child. Unlike Zannah again, I have always put my hand up in PSHE, science or whatever and when any opportunity, to have the attention.....

Louise: I think to do that that means that you must feel pretty comfortable with the situation and with yourselves and your identity?

Zannah: I am proud of it. What is there not to be proud of?

Louise: I think that was the mixed message I got from my parents because if they didn't tell me and they were not prepared to talk about it, why is that? Is that because it is shameful or is because it is a secret and how are other people going to react to me?

Elspeth: That was one of the first questions I asked when I started talking to my parents about it was: why did you feel you couldn't, was it due to any feelings of shame? But they said completely not and having spoken to them some more about it - it's not. It was just more a case of preserving the knowledge in a way for my brother and I once they felt that we were in a position to hear it so there weren't loads of people out there who knew before we did. So that was more what it was about.

7) Based on your experiences, what sort of words would you suggest parents use when telling and discussing with the child their origins? Would you use words like donor, or would you use kind person, or would you actually say genetic and biological parent?

Sam: A bit of a short answer but I just think that they should just use big, science words as early as possible just start, just have them grow up with the scientific terms from an early age, even if they don't understand them at first, then they will always be used to them.

Katherine: I don't think that so much. I think they should use age appropriate language which doesn't sound as I mean it to. I mean if you are talking to a 2 or 3 year old and you say you were created by donor insemination, they would be like (over their heads). So I think 'kind person' is a good word to use but I think 'sperm donor' or 'egg donor' as the child gets older and maybe starts asking more questions you should definitely use language that you feel describes their situation well. If they are sixteen and they are still using the words 'kind person', you should probably start telling them what it actually is. It will be quite interesting to see if you told a 2 or 3 year old and use the big language and then they grew up to be a genius. Just fill them with all this information when they were young but I think use the vocabulary that they will understand is probably a good idea.

Zannah: Remember that we were saying earlier that we didn't understand, even though we were told early. It was only when we were old enough to understand the language that we actually grasped our situation. I was told, what at 3 or 4, and as soon as I could understand I was questioning those things. It was always put to me that 'you were wanted so much that this very nice man donated his baby making things to have you'. One thing I'm personally against and it's about the only thing I get defensive about with all this stuff is people or anyone referring to my donor as my 'real father'. I find that insulting to me and insulting to my dad because I have been

brought up with it being my father who *is* my father. A father is someone who raises you, who wants you, who wants to love you and look after you. That's what a father is, so for your donor to be called "your real father" is wrong. I think it takes something away from my dad for all the genuine love and hard work he's done to be a great father so I think it is very important to keep the thing separate so people understand that donor does not mean a dad, donor means sperm, sperm means a baby but a father is a father.

Sam: But most people probably want to say, use the right terms. So they might stumble a bit the first time, and say something like "your father"

Zannah: I like to explain to them that for me that does not feel right.

Katherine: It's just genetic; you don't have any feelings for this. It's just a blank box in the family tree.

Zannah: A father loves you and looks after you and is there for you and that's what a father is. It seems to me... sperm, genetics, science that's how we come about, but when we are in the world, how we are looked after is by parents, by people, by relationships, not by what your genetic makeup is. That's what I say.

Louise (to Imogen): Can you remember what words were helpful when you were told?

Imogen: No, because I was 2 or 3 when I was told, so I can't really remember what my mum said to me or how she explained it to me.

Louise: Ok. What about you Peter?

Peter: I prefer to use 'donor' because other kids I've met through the network I've called 'donor kids'. To me 'genetic father' is quite a strong word, whereas 'donor' seems a lot lighter. It doesn't seem as meaningful, whereas 'genetic father' seems quite strong. When you say to someone 'genetic father' they think that's a bit weird whereas 'donor' is a little bit easier. I personally don't really know what having a big father figure is like. I've always been a single child; my mum's always been a single mum. I have actually been lucky enough, one of my friend's dads is really nice and he's in a way become a bit of a father figure to me because as I went round to his house he'd play with me and my friend. I have done a few little jobs for him because he is a builder. He's taught me how to use tools and things which perhaps my mum wouldn't have taught me. I was actually quite lucky to find someone who would take me on board and let me treat him as a bit of a father figure.

Louise: I think 'donor' is a good word. It is the word I feel most comfortable using. 'Kind person' is probably best when they are younger. I think the "My and Our Story books" are really good actually. I think for the few that have grown up with them would you say?

General agreement from panel – "yes", "Definitely", "really helped me out", "like the pictures".

Katherine: I think my favourite picture is of the three kind men sitting on the chairs in hospital. I'm like "that's mine, not that one. I don't like that one".

Elsbeth: I'd say 'donor' I think. It is a very neutral word.

Louise: I think for us, you have to separate the genetics from the environmental - nature versus nurture. Most people wouldn't have to do that, but for us I think it is very important to have a distinction about what is genetics and what is love and nature and part of a family.

Zannah: and what a father is because a lot of people can be brought into the world with their genetic father but what if he is a drug addict who isn't around? Does that make him a father or is

there some other man in there who nurtured that child who is more of a father. I think it is good to grow up questioning.

Elsbeth: It is strange this whole thing has made me question the validity of genetics and the importance that people put on it. I think I fell into that before I knew I would have made so many assumptions about what genes make you in a way but now I am so sceptical, because I know so much of who I am is because of my dad and I am not genetically related to him so it means so little in so many ways.

Do you have any advice on how parents can support their donor conceived children? Is there anything that was particularly helpful for you or could have been done differently?

Louise: I think the earlier the better and a joint decision would have been possibly better because, in my case it was me that had to bring it up with my dad. It took him a long time to come to terms with it. He did not want to know and I didn't want a DNA test so I asked for blood groups and it was through my blood group that I found out that I was not genetically related to my dad. When he handed me his blood group he said "I don't want to know what that means to you, but I know it is important". It was a few years until I went back to him and said "Dad I really need you to know that this has given me the information that I am not your biological daughter and I want to talk about that". Since then it's been a big weight off my mind and I've certainly become saner! Our relationship is really strong actually, and I wish I could have had that 14 years ago.

Elsbeth: Definitely a joint decision, unity between both parents to tell. Again, personally, I would have preferred to know earlier, but every situation is different. You can only go with the tools you have got.

Peter: The earlier the better. You tell the child, the child knows about it. Also my mum made friends with other single mums in one of the network meetings. We meet up regularly now and we don't really talk about being donor conceived but we're mates. It means something to me to know other people that are in the same situation as me.

Also they are all single mums as well so it's all really helpful. They are all in the same boat as me and it's really nice that you just don't have to talk to them; you don't have to say "what do you think about your donor?". You're just mates and it's nice to know that there is someone there in the same situation as you.

Louise: I guess that's the good thing about the network is that you actually grow up thinking that this is normal, which is a good thing.

Katherine: You grow up *knowing* its normal, you don't think it, you know.

Louise: Imogen what do you think was helpful for you? What do you think parents can do?

Imogen: The earlier the better, then you grow up thinking about it. I grew up knowing about it, instead of being told when you are older because then you have got to accept it and think about it more.

Zannah: Absolutely. I think obviously the earlier the better. I think if the parents don't have a problem with it, and you, as parents, before deciding to conceive have really sat down and thought and talked about absolutely every issue you could possibly have. I think my mum talked about grieving for the child that you would never have together naturally and that being ok. If you're preparing yourself to be ok with it, if you're ok with it then the kids are going to be ok with it. Kids don't know much, when they are little they'll believe anything they're told. If you grow up believing that it's absolutely fine, I think the emphasis for me was "you're special" and "how much you're wanted". That's the thing about being donor conceived - you can never tell me I wasn't wanted. I am very well loved here. My parents took a lot of effort to get there. Instill that at a very early age.

Louise: Just very quickly I'd like to add that although there is a debate whether do they understand and when they are older they understand more. I think for me, I actually understood a bit too much! It's bad enough at 13 even thinking that your parents have sex!

Katherine: Just repeating what everyone else has just said. The earlier the better. When kids are young their brains are like little sponges. You tell them the information but you have to keep reminding them because I think the worst thing a parent can do is to tell the child when they are young and then never mention it again because that instils in the child that it is something wrong. They have been told and now you should never tell anyone else. I think definitely "My Story" books are good because you can keep them around and every time the child is like "what was that thing you told me again?"

"Look, read the book". You keep telling them and every time make sure you tell them it's ok, and discussing things with the children is definitely good because my parents talked to me all the time. I can't remember not knowing and that's made me who I am now, I guess, knowing all my life basically.

Zannah: Knowing all your life and being fine about it.

Katherine: There's never been uncertainty, certainly with me there's never been anything I've ever questioned, apart from when I was five So I was like, "with the kind man.tell me again". Tell them when they are young.

Sam: I would say the earlier the better, preferably before an age where they'd be consciously be able to remember it later. So they can't even remember it. I was 4 and then I was told. I never was told, I always just knew.

Zannah: It's always just who you are.

Sam: I think just joking about it can stop it being a family taboo. I'd say to my dad something like, "I'm sure my donor would be much better looking" or "I'm sure he'd give me more money per week" or something and he'd just say "well get out of my house and find him then, if he's so great"

Louise: I think that is the thing that parents do worry about, but it's down to how the parents react to it. If you are absolutely certain that you are this child's parent then whatever they throw at you, you need to be able to handle it.

Zannah: have that surety before you have children, make sure you know that. I get a bit unhappy hearing about people complaining about it when their kids are six or whatever and I think "God, how did they get into this situation? Surely, they had a lot of time to prepare about it?" To be honest, yeah if you're fine about it, they'll be fine about it. It is as black and white as that. You have to obviously go through a lot of grieving or whatever and time to get to that place. It is so important.

Louise: yeah, process it yourselves, and then you'll help the children deal with it, I think.

What do you think should be written on birth certificates?

Louise: There has been a proposal from donor conceived adults that the fact of the donor conception should be your birth certificate and what you have for your social parent and biological parent on the birth certificate and when you reach 18 you have another one that you can access with the donor's name on it. Do you think this is a good idea?

Louise: For me personally, I would like my dad's name on the birth certificate. He's my dad and I am glad his name is there. But, I would like to know more about the donor, whether that means

knowing his name, I don't know. I don't know whether it's necessary to have it on the birth certificate because we have that anonymity ban at the moment and that's the most important thing I think.

Elsbeth: Similarly, I don't particularly see a reason why it should be on the birth certificate. My dad is my dad. There seems to be no legal legitimate reason for it...beyond a.....I'm not quite sure...

Louise: We're not trying to get child maintenance from the donor!

Louise: Peter, I guess it's a bit different for you because your mum's a single parent. How do you feel about having the donor's name on your birth certificate?

Peter: Just write 'donor' to be honest with you. I have grown up knowing that my biological father was a donor and that was the word I used, so I would expect donor to be written on there. But also I think it depends, if you are going to tell your child that you are a donor (conceived) then please do write 'donor' on it, but if you're not going to tell and your going to tell them that your father who is going to look after you for some or all of your life. Possiblyyou should put the father on there because...if I was in the situation where I'd been donor conceived, and I had grown up with my father all my life not knowing and then one day I stumbled across my birth certificate and it had donor on. I would question a lot of things.

Elsbeth: It would be a horrible way to find out.

Peter: It would be. My mum's a single mum. I would rather have just 'donor' written on it, because that's what I've always known.

Imogen: Same as Peter really. Just having 'donor' on it. Like whether it has donor egg or donor sperm, because that would be something you would have to know about on the birth certificate, but obviously having a mother and father as well.

Zannah: I feel pretty much the same. I think you should have...I just want my mum and dad who have raised me on my birth certificate. I think in my situation there's absolutely no reason why I'd need to have donor there.

Katherine: Same really. I think if you put donor or "other parent" unknown on the birth certificate it would be taking something away from the non-biological parent. Certainly in the case of the sperm donors they have done quite a simple thing to create a child and yet your non-biological father has raised you for many years. I don't feel the donor deserves to be on the birth certificate, they have not really done all that much towards the child I suppose. I don't see any reason why there should be a need to put it on the birth certificates. Certainly it would take something away from the non-biological parent.

Sam: Well, I disagree. I think it should be on there, but I think it should have the parents who you live with, their names and then maybe underneath your dad maybe donor, slightly faded out or something.

Louise: That you tear off?

Sam: In not quite as big a font

Louise: Like a pin number?

Sam: Yeah, I think birth certificates are scientific records. I think there is not that much room for sentimentality. You really should have your biological parents on at least as well as the parents who you live with.

Zannah: I wouldn't mind having a little "donor" written underneath but I guess... what is the point of a birth certificate?

Louise: I guess the reason for them doing it is to try to encourage parents to tell their children earlier. I think that there is a different way to do that rather than enforcing it. It is going to send more people abroad to seek anonymity and more underground. They are going to be less likely to tell their children, and that is the last thing we want.

Louise: Ok, thank you for that. I just wanted to spend one minute just to say that...I don't know whether if any of you have noticed, it feels pretty obvious to me!...that I am actually expecting a child of my own and I am 15 weeks pregnant. It's naturally conceived which feels very strange, because we actually did have the conversation before we even thought about having children, which was if we had to go down this route would we and the answer was yes.

I think that being DC adds a different dimension for me. Nobody knows what genes they are passing on to their children, but for me, I fell like I have got even less control. There was this choice that was made for me 27 years ago by my parents, by the doctors, by the donor, by society which said "this is ok and you don't need to know that information and you have to trust us" and that sets that for me, my future, and also the future of my children...hopefully, grandchildren. These are genes that get passed down. And I wanted to say that when I went for my scan, the doctor asked me about my medical history. I said "I don't think there is any diabetes...on my mum's side I know there's not but on my dad's side my paternal genes are anonymous, as I'm donor conceived". She looked at me and she said, "Oh, how long did it take you to conceive". I thought 'that's a bit of a weird question'. Then I twigged and I said "No, no, no, this one is naturally conceived, it's me who's donor conceived!" I think that just sums it up: donor conception is thought of as a treatment for infertility and that produces babies. What people forget is that these babies grow up to living, breathing, thinking human beings.

Louise: I just wanted to say thank you for inviting us all here today, as well as thank you to us for being brave and standing up in front of you, because it means you are actually thinking ahead to your children growing up and becoming adults themselves and possibly giving you grandchildren in the future.

(Long applause)

