



A letter from Olivia to would-be DI Parents about 'Telling'

Dear Would-be DI Parents

Twenty-three years ago my husband and I discovered that the only way we would be able to have a child was by using donated sperm or adopting. After nine months of quietly grieving the child we could not have together, we decided that donor insemination was the best way forward for us. I was lucky enough to conceive the first time and our son was born nine months later. It subsequently took five inseminations to conceive our daughter.

Both our children have known about their DI origins since they were very little. It is now common practice to be open with children about their origins but back in those days our clinic was very surprised when we said we were going to tell them. We made this decision because we couldn't imagine living with a lie about something so important, and we have never regretted this decision. Talking about DI to a child can feel very burdensome to parents, but if you begin early, they accept the facts very easily. In fact they are often more interested in who is coming to play or what they are having for tea. The trick is to keep the language simple and in line with their stage of development and build up the information in small building blocks. Parents, particularly men, worry that a child might reject them when they know that they are not their 'real' father, but our daughter and son are very clear that their Dad

is their father, even if they don't have a genetic connection with him.

As young people now, each of our children has a different perspective on their DI origins. The eldest, a boy, is not interested in his donor but says that it is very important to him that he has been told the truth. Our daughter is curious about her donor and would like to thank him for giving her life, but despite the fact that she will almost certainly never have this opportunity, she is adamant that we were right to share the information with her.

Telling children about their origins when they are young is likely to be in their best interests, although it can feel very difficult for parents. It can be tempting to think that you can just have the treatment and go home and forget about it. But ignoring or denying the truth does not make it go away. In fact these things have a tendency to fester and cause much more trouble later, if they are not thought about early on. And since the ending of donor anonymity in April 2005, would-be parents need to think particularly carefully about the consequences of pretending that they did not need help from a donor to make their family. Donor conceived young people who find out about their conception in teenage years, or later, and are able to discover the identity of their donor, may be much more disturbed by the information, even to the point of seeking a relationship with the donor



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if they are feeling angry with parents who failed to understand their need to know earlier. The well-being of all parties, parents, offspring and donor, may be compromised in these circumstances.

These are some of the reasons why 'telling' is important –

- It is respectful of each child (young person, adult) as a unique individual. It is their right to have this information.
- Keeping secrets takes up energy which is better spent on close family relationships.
- Relationships in families can be threatened by the secret if –
 - a. ANYONE else at all knows (and usually someone does)
 - b. The man with fertility difficulties (and/or his partner) feels shame about this method of family creation
 - c. Unanswered questions or evasive answers, glances between couples or awkward silences create an atmosphere which is felt by the child and others
 - d. The child feels 'different' in some way but having no explanation for this, blames him or herself.
- Research has shown that disclosure or finding out about origins in adolescence or

adulthood can be damaging to present and future relationships. It is hard to re-establish trust when a person realises they have been lied to for a long time.

- In an 'information age' where DNA testing kits are available through the Internet and many column inches and TV hours are devoted to stories about human genetics, young people who become suspicious about their parentage have many ways of finding out if their genetic connections are as they have been led to believe. Those with suspicions, and who were conceived after August 1991, will be able to check with the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority's (HFEA) register as soon as they are 18, (or 16 if they intend to marry) to see if they were indeed conceived with the aid of donated gametes (eggs, sperm or embryos). And those conceived after 1 April 2005 with sperm from donors who have agreed to be known to offspring, will be able to get the name and last known address of their donor from the HFEA from the age of 18.

The best time to start telling

Many parents say that they feel the best time to tell a child would be when they are old enough to grasp the idea completely. This is very understandable. Talking to young children about such a personal matter can seem a strange idea.



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However, leaving 'telling' until later can lead to difficulties. For a start you can find yourself unwittingly spinning an increasingly complicated web of lies, both to the child and to others. This can start as soon as your child is born. "Who does s/he look like?" will be the question on the lips of everyone who coos at your baby. How are you going to answer?

Around the age of eight children reach the stage where they begin to be better able to understand about DI, but by that time many people (relatives, friends, health professionals) will inevitably have been misled or lied to. The upset caused by the lie can be much greater than the knowledge of use of donated sperm. Like the offspring themselves, relatives can be very hurt by not being trusted with the truth. Many members of the Network who were convinced that family members would be horrified by the knowledge of their use of donated sperm, have been surprised and delighted at the support they received when they plucked up the courage to tell.

Children of eight need full explanations with time and opportunities to ask questions in order to completely take in information about DI origins. Many parents might feel completely comfortable doing this, but if you have not talked about the issues for many years there is a danger that you may not be familiar with the language – both to do with DI and sex and reproduction – that you may

need to use to help your child understand what they are being told. This unfamiliarity or awkwardness might give your child the message that being a DI child is something to be ashamed of, even if you don't actually say this.

Parents who believe, for the very best of reasons, that their child should be the first person to have information about their origins face a similar dilemma, but with an added dimension. The child has the burden of deciding who else should know and being the object of curiosity when these people are told. If, on the other hand, relatives and close friends have known from the beginning – conception or birth – then the child grows up in an accepting atmosphere where they are highly unlikely to be seen as unusual in any way and can mention their origins without fear of upsetting someone.

Teenage years are not a good time to break the news about DI beginnings. Young people are busy finding out who they are by testing their own and their parents limits. New information that might put in doubt the relationship of trust in the family, is not helpful at this time of great change. We as parents need to be strong and solid for our young people to push against, not pulling the rug out from under them.

Some parents worry that teenagers are likely to throw the lack of genetic connection back in their faces during a row.... "You can't tell me what to



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do, you're not my real father anyway". This has happened in a few DI families but it is clear that it was either an attempt at testing parental responses and boundaries (very normal behaviour for teenagers) or in anger or sadness at the realisation that they are not the child of a much loved parents. What really matters is now parents respond, and parents who feel confident and comfortable with their use of donor conception and have practised openness from the beginning, are more likely to be able to stay calm and deal with this challenge to their authority without too much hurt or anger.

Odd as it may seem, starting to talk with your child about their DI conception when they are between three and five is much easier! Some families start talking to their babies about it – just to get comfortable and familiar with the words. Babies of course love to be talked to about anything!

Sharing Information with Young Children

What is most important for a young child is that they are loved and feel secure in the family. They are not likely to be interested in whose sperm or egg made them. So take all the opportunities you can to let your child know how much you care about them and that they are part of a loving family.

When your child starts asking where babies come from, or before if you like,

particularly if you are having another child or someone close to you is pregnant, start dropping pieces of information into the conversation like –

Sometimes Mummies and Daddys need some help to have a baby.

AND/OR

Some Mummies and Daddys need help from a clinic/hospital to make a baby

One Network family, where the male partner's infertility had come about because of treatment for cancer, started the explanation to their child with the words, *Babies are usually made from a little bit of a mummy and a little bit of a daddy, but because daddy wasn't very well, you were made from a little bit of Mummy and a little bit of another man.*

Later, when you have explained that it takes a seed or sperm (use a word that feels comfortable) from a Daddy and an egg from a Mummy to make a baby you can add –

Some Daddys don't have enough seeds to make a baby and they need another Daddy to give some of his
OR

Daddy's sperm couldn't swim fast enough to reach Mummy's egg, so we had to go to the hospital to get some sperm from a kind man who agreed to give us some of his.

Or in the case of vasectomy, *Daddy's sperm weren't able to get through the tubes to reach Mummy's egg...*



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Use natural opportunities such as TV programmes, friends pregnancies, etc. to repeat this sort of information and after a few weeks or months, add, *And this is how you were made OR And this is what Mummy/Daddy and I did when we wanted to have you.*

Don't be surprised if you get no reaction at all. Children have more important things on their minds. Just come back to it now and again. Bathtime can be a good moment, when you are chatting about this and that; and be prepared to take opportunities as they arise to repeat information and check out just what they have understood. I remember my daughter asking me about the 'nice man' who had given sperm to help make her. It was clear that she thought I had actually met him, so I had to explain that I didn't know who he was, just that I knew he must be a nice man because he wanted to help mummies and daddies to have a baby. Some of the most important conversations initiated by our children have taken place in the car and other Network members confirm this. It seems there is something about being in an enclosed space but where eye contact is not possible (assuming parents in the front and children in the back) that encourages intimate exchanges, but this doesn't usually happen until children are a bit older.

Children love stories and particularly ones that have them at the centre. You can create your own story with

spoken words or in the form of a book, about how your family came into being. An additional help can be the book *My Story* which is available from the Donor Conception Network. This is suitable for young children from about three and has a cartoon picture on one page with a line of text on each facing page. It explains about a Mummy and Daddy who are sad because they can't have a baby of their own, and how the hospital helped them to be happy again by using the seed from a kind man to help make a baby.

This book is intended to be part of a child's collection of picture story books, not kept on a special shelf accessible only to grown-ups. It can be personalised with the child's own photograph at the back.

You may also want to buy simple books intended for young children about the Facts of Life and adapt them with your own words.

Starting in this way, children grow up with the information about their origins being as natural to them as the fact that they have, say...six cousins, one granny, two grandads and an Auntie Mavis who lives on a farm. They just accept it and can't remember a time when they didn't know.

From about age eight onwards **some** children may want more detailed information about the treatment, what sort of person their donor was and which characteristics they might have inherited from him. The leaflet



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aimed at this age group and produced by our *How to Tell* project may be of help at this time.

Children told early accept completely that they have a Daddy and a donor. They do not confuse the two.

If your child was conceived with sperm from an anonymous donor, don't feel bad if you can't answer all their questions. Give them the information you do have, if and when they ask for it. Prior to July 2004 clinics varied hugely in the type and amount of information gathered about donors. If your donor was recruited before this date you may want to contact the clinic, perhaps via the counsellor, to see if there is further non-identifying information you can have. After July 2004 donors at all centres have been required to provide a standard amount of information, including their religion, occupation, hobbies, interests and reasons for donating, as well as general physical characteristics. Donors recruited from April 2005 will have agreed to be available to be known to any children they have helped create from that child's 18th birthday, so this is information you will be able to give to your child along with all the non-identifying information.

Your child may be perfectly happy with the amount of information available or be very frustrated by it. Talk with them about the balance of nature and nurture (we are all a mixture of the two). Listen to them

and let them know you understand their feelings, whatever they are.

As a parent it is easy to feel bad about not being able to provide everything your child wants. But don't beat yourself up. By being honest, listening, acknowledging their feelings and generally being there for them you are doing everything you can to provide them with the tools (resilience, high self-esteem, self-awareness) to cope with what life throws at them. Past experience has shown that DI children who have grown up in open families with 'good enough' parenting, want to make the best of their lives whatever the circumstances of their beginnings.

Who Else Needs to Know

We told close family and friends when I became pregnant with our first child and since then have told new good friends as trust has developed between us. As founding members of DC Network we have been extremely open about our circumstances, to the point of doing publicity on television and in newspapers. This started when our son was eight but we stopped for several years at his request when he was a young teenager. When the children started school, we decided to tell teachers so that if our children mentioned their origins in class the information could be accepted as normal and our kids would not be made to feel unusual in any way. So throughout Infant and Junior school we told each new form teacher. When our daughter was nine she did



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mention it. The teacher helped her explain to the class and they then carried on with the lesson. Our daughter continues to talk about her DI origins and is now doing publicity for the Network in her own right. To our surprise our son told new friends at university about his conception and the Network. They are both now very comfortable with others knowing this information.

You will need to decide as your child grows up who needs to know, but a general climate of openness within the family where a child gets the message that this is a safe topic to talk about, is helpful. Many Network members prefer to keep the information to quite a close circle of family and friends, telling professionals and others on a 'need to know' basis only. As teenage years start, the decision about disclosure now properly belongs to the young person. It is quite normal for a teenager not to want to talk about their DI origins for a few years. Being just like your mates is really important at this time.

Deciding to go ahead with using donor insemination to build our family was our first good decision. The second one was deciding to be open with our children, family and friends. We have never regretted either decision and our children are now old enough to let us know very clearly that these decisions were good ones. They are glad to be alive and have parents who respected them enough to tell them the truth.

If you are struggling with decisions about openness or 'how to tell' now –

- Keep in mind that good outcomes for the future depend on starting to work through the difficult feelings now. Try to avoid putting these issues on the 'too difficult' shelf.
- Remember that what is important to young children is having a loving mum and dad, not who is genetically related to who. Close relationships built in the early years make a solid foundation for the future.
- Try to look ahead and think how you would like the relationship between you and your child to be when they are.....in school, as teenagers, as young adults. Are secrets going to help or get in the way?
- Being 'open' is a state of mind and a process. Start early, take your time, don't worry if you stumble over the words to start with. Answer *their* questions (rather than what you as an adult think they might be asking) using simple children's language.
- Enjoy your children. They love you.

With very best wishes

Olivia Montuschi



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Further support and information

The Donor Conception Network was started in 1993 by a group of families (ours amongst them) who had all chosen to be open with their children about their origins. We wanted to help break the isolation felt by so many people using donor assisted conception methods, and to share our experiences of talking to our children, and to family and friends, about DI and more recently egg donation. We have two national meetings a year, one in London and one elsewhere, local groups in many areas, produce a Newsletter twice yearly, have a library of books, videos, audio tapes and articles that can be borrowed and, most importantly, we put people in touch with each other.

Network Membership

You can join the network as an individual or a couple. Annual subscriptions

are £15 (£5 unwaged). Join on-line using the PayPal facility, download a membership form from the website or simply send a cheque to our PO Box below.

The Donor Conception Network is a registered charity, registration number 1041297

Useful addresses

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Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority
21 Bloomsbury Street
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0207 291 8200
website: www.hfea.gov.uk

British Infertility Counselling Association
Website: www.bica.net

Letters in the Planning a Family Series

A letter from Walter to would-be DI Dads
A letter from Olivia to would-be DI Mums
A letter from Olivia to would-be DI Parents about 'telling'
A letter from Emily to would-be single mums
A letter from Rachel to would-be egg donation parents
A letter from Bridget and Andrea to lesbian women

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