



## Planning a family on your own: a letter from Emily to single women

Dear Would-be Single Mother

This is a letter to any single woman thinking of becoming a mother through donor conception. I hope that these thoughts can help you in your decision, and in carrying it through to fruition with more clarity and certainty.

However you got to the point where you are now, it's likely that we have some things in common. As children, most of us dreamed of the day we'd have children of our own, and somehow, things haven't worked out like the fairy tale. There comes a point where you realise that if you want something, it's no good waiting for it to happen, you've got to make the moves yourself. Single parenting is at least talked about these days, if rarely in very positive terms: we all know it can be done, but it's against the norm, it's hard, and how about the children?

We each have to work out our own answers to these questions. It's important to come to a view which is positive and optimistic, to feel strong and hopeful about what you're doing, to carry you through the rough patches that there will surely be.

The processes you go through may be very different, each of us has her own way of doing things, but there are some things which many of us will have shared. I hope that this leaflet may raise some questions

and help you answer others for yourself.

The process of becoming a parent is a major upheaval at the best of times. Making the choice to go it alone, to use a clinical process, to bring a child into the world who will have to live with these choices, is much more complex than I'd ever thought about. Don't get me wrong, I don't regret a second of it, but I do think that I was frightened of disapproval and pressure to change my mind, and so I avoided facing up to some important aspects of what I was doing. I wouldn't have done anything differently, but I could have been better prepared.

### **Coming to a decision**

This is much more of an issue for some than for others. There are some choices to be made. From 1 April 2005, all donors will have agreed for their identity to be made available to offspring at the age of 18, but only limited information may be available to you to make your choice. The usual advice is that one should choose a donor with similar physical characteristics, so that your child fits into your family. You may feel that other characteristics matter as much or more. You can contact the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority for information about clinics in the UK (although they won't tell you the ones that are friendly to single women), and talk to others in the same situation in your area through the Donor Conception



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Network to get the consumer's eye view of local services.

Once you've got this far, things take on their own momentum, and you're soon on the roller-coaster of what is known to most as fertility treatment.

I started treatment at 38. It took a few months between making the phone call and the first insemination. Waiting on a list, seeing the doctor and counsellor, then going off to have the necessary tests and reports, and finally, there I was in the waiting room, which I was going to get to know very well!

The counselling session is the first thing which, with the benefit of hindsight, I might have done quite differently. My own fears of being judged led me to see it as a hurdle rather than an opportunity, and once I'd 'got through' I wouldn't have dreamed of going back for more. Now, I think it would have been good to take up the opportunity to talk through some things to which I wasn't giving much thought...I was surprised to find it a fascinating, thought provoking and enjoyable session, but I was oblivious to some significant issues. Don't fear raising vague thoughts, fears and questions with the clinic counsellor. If they're worth their salt, they shouldn't be 'telling' you anything, only helping you find your own answers. As far as I know, no counsellor has ever barred anyone from treatment.

If some of the questions are uncomfortable, then take the

opportunity to clarify how you feel. It's important not to ignore the things that are most difficult: at some later stage, you may well have to answer to your child about the same issues. You may not be able to have it all worked out beforehand (and even if you do, you may find it all changes with time!), but it's important to be able to face the questions. Finally, keep it all in perspective: people in two-parent families have regrets too. Our children need to learn how to live with the ups and downs and still enjoy life, not allow the negatives to take over.

### Treatment

For nearly every woman I've spoken to, the first insemination led to a feeling that she must certainly be pregnant, and then the crashing realisation that she wasn't. Being prepared for the cycle of intense emotions, from anxious waiting for the right day, fitting the treatment into your schedule at short notice, hoping and waiting for signs, trying to be 'careful' in all sorts of ways, and then the disappointment, and getting ready to try again...This may well be harder than you expected, even if you are one of the few lucky ones who succeeds first time!

The different treatment protocols are so diverse that it's best not to go into them here. They can be very demanding, the drugs (if you need to use them) can be devastating, both emotionally and physically, and the process will intrude into your life – it can't just be fitted into an



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unobtrusive corner. Again, being in touch with others doing the same thing can be very helpful, to discuss, compare, find out about options, as well as for simple moral support. Many of us felt at times that we were being pressured to do something we weren't too sure about. This is when support can help you come to a decision that's right for you.

### Support

Some women start the process without having discussed it with anyone at all, preferring to wait to explain when it becomes more real, the bump becomes obvious or whatever. Most of us will have talked to friends or family while making the decision, and can turn to these people for support during treatment. You may prefer not to have to account to everyone at each stage every month, and you need to think of a way of saying you'll tell them as soon as there's something to say. Bear in mind that someone who sees themselves as a close friend may feel hurt when they find out afterwards that you didn't tell them something so important: although having a child has changed my relationships with all my friends, some friendships have been lost, which I deeply regret.

One possibility, which most of us would prefer not to think about, is the risk of miscarriage: in fact, it is terribly common, up to 1 in 3 pregnancies, and can be a harrowing experience. It is worth thinking about your support needs if you should start having problems very early on,

when miscarriage is most common. If you've told lots of people about your treatment, then some of them are probably checking up on your progress, and it will be easy to call on one of them. Miscarriages happen out of the blue, and I was very grateful for my sister's help, phoning work for me, fetching me clean knickers to go home in, and just being there.

On a more positive note, you can link this bit of planning with thinking about who would be best to ask to be a birth partner. You may even be allowed more than one, but they need to be willing, maybe to go to an antenatal session, to come over in the middle of the night, to keep a couple of weeks in the distant future fairly free for you...

At this stage, many of us have found, joined or started support groups. If there's nothing in your area, you could put a notice up in your clinic to see if there are any others like you looking to meet up: in my case, I joined such a group, which is still meeting monthly ten years on. Now a group of families, the children have known each other since they were tiny, and they know that they are all much wanted children by donor conception. We hope they will be able to turn to each other when they start having questions they don't want to put to us. The Donor Conception Network provides a great forum in the twice-yearly conferences.



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### Who Needs to Know/Secrecy

You're not going to be able to conceal single mothering once it becomes a reality, and even if you don't come across anybody indiscreet enough to ask outright, it's useful to work out how to explain things. It helps if you can be proud and positive, which can disarm even the most judgmental person. I think it's worth thinking at this stage about how you'll explain things to your child: there isn't one right answer, we each have to find what fits best. It won't be good enough to have rehearsed one answer: you can guarantee that your child is going to bring the subject up in unexpected ways and places, which will test your preparedness.

Actually, many of us have found that it's other children who ask more questions in the early days. You need to work out exactly what you think 'dad' means, and whether a sperm donor fits the bill: does your child have no father, or an unknown father? Do you want your child to have all the available information about the donor from the start, or do you want to wait until they ask or are older? How do you feel about other people knowing: will you tell your midwife and health visitor? You *can* ask for it not to be recorded on your new baby's medical records, to follow them on for life. And if you're worried about the registry office, let me put your mind at ease: it's no problem, they're perfectly used to it, and they just put a line through the box marked 'father'.

### The Children

You hear a lot about the risks to children in one parent families: if you look closely at a lot of the research, the evidence is not as clear cut as it's presented in the media. Most of us will have more comfortable circumstances than the stereotypical lone mother. We have chosen our situation, and don't need to expend any energy on blaming, resenting, protecting or trying to pay back an abandoning father or partner. I can't pretend it's all been easy, but I wouldn't believe any parent who did. I know many children of donor conception, and I can't think of a better group of kids for my son to meet up with every month, and feel he belongs to.

The issue of knowing about their conception, and knowing about the donor, has always seemed simple to me, but it has also changed with my son developing his own personality. This is one of the issues I might have gained a lot from talking over with a counsellor in the very early stages, although I didn't see it as very important then. I have always believed that secrets don't keep well, and that I'd rather my son knew from the beginning, to the best of his understanding, how he was made.

Until April 2005, donors have been guaranteed anonymity, although they could volunteer to add to the basic details the recipient and offspring were given. From April 2005, offspring will have the right to identifying information once they are 18.



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I believe that we can make it easier for our children by being open from the start, so they don't have to cope with the realisation they have been deceived by those they should have been able to trust. The studies of adoptees find that this can be a deeply damaging experience. I don't know how much genetics define who we are, but I do recognise how important it feels to some, and I hope that my son can grow with a strong sense of belonging in our family, our community and our society.

### **Finally**

These are just some of the issues which I have heard brought up many times: there will be many more. You can only prepare yourself with the strength of certainty that you are doing the right thing for you, and that you have what it takes to arm your child against the hurdles the world will present. If you are still in the deliberation stage, let me offer all my support, as a woman who now has a delightful five-year-old, and cannot imagine life without the privilege.

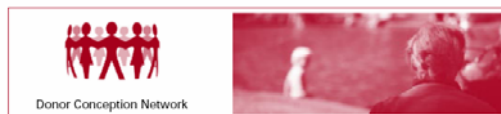
If I can narrow it down to two key points:

- Think about your own needs: if you don't do this already, you'll need to learn. Be clear about where your support comes from, build new support networks, discuss this with your friends and family so you know where they stand. Join the DC Network to talk to others in the same boat and for a place to take any questions or ideas. Don't even think of going ahead if you prefer an easy life!
- Be proud of what you are doing, so you can offer pride to your child.

With best wishes for a rapid and successful journey through these tribulations and into the most fulfilling, challenging and responsible role anyone could ever take on!

Emily





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### Further support and information

The Donor Conception Network was started in 1993 by a group of families 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 family and friends, about how our families came into being. We have two national meetings a year, one in London and one outside, have 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

Donor Conception Network  
PO Box 7471  
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Email: [enquiries@dcnetwork.org](mailto:enquiries@dcnetwork.org)  
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Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority  
21 Bloomsbury Street  
London WC1B 3HF  
Website: [www.hfea.gov.uk](http://www.hfea.gov.uk)  
Tel: 020 7291 8200

British Infertility Counselling Association  
Website: [www.bica.net](http://www.bica.net)

Single Mothers by Choice  
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Website: [www.singlemothersbychoice.com](http://www.singlemothersbychoice.com)

#### 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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