

Age of disclosure and donor offspring's feelings about finding out they were donor conceived

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from the first ever large scale study of individuals conceived by donor insemination who are aware of their donor conception. This has become possible through the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR), a website that allows individuals conceived by donor to search for and make contact with their donor and their donor siblings that is, other donor conceived people who share the same donor and are effectively their half siblings. Through this website we have been able to recruit a sample of 165 offspring conceived by sperm donation. This has allowed us to obtain data from a large sample of offspring aged from 13 to adulthood about their experiences of being donor conceived.

The literature on adoption, as well as studies of donor conceived offspring who found out about their conception later in life, suggest that it is best for individuals to be told about their donor conception in childhood. The aim of our study was to examine whether age of disclosure was related to offspring's feelings about their donor conception.

METHOD

On-line questionnaires were completed anonymously by parents of donor offspring, donors and donor offspring themselves. This presentation will focus on the offspring only.

The questionnaire consisted of multiple choice and open-ended questions. Data were obtained on offspring's experiences of finding out about their donor conception and their current feelings about their donor conception.

RESULTS

PARTICIPANTS

One hundred and sixty five offspring conceived by sperm donor completed the survey. They were aged from 13 – 61 ($M = 22$, $SD = 10$).

Half (82) were aged between 13 and 17 years and the other half (81) were aged 18 or over. Seventy-four per cent (123) were female and 25% (42) were male.

Eighty-nine per cent of respondents were currently living in the US (148), with 4 (2%) currently living in the UK.

In terms of family type, 58% (96) of offspring reported having heterosexual parents, 23% (38) had a mother only, and 15% (25) had same-sex parents.

AGE	MIN	MAX	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
	13	61	22	10	
SEX	Female	Male			
	74% (n=123)	25% (n=42)			
CURRENT RESIDENCE	USA	UK	CANADA	AUSTRALIA	OTHER
	89% (148)	2% (4)	4% (7)	1% (2)	.5% (1)
FAMILY TYPE	HETEROSEXUAL	MOTHER ONLY	SAME-SEX		
	58% (n=96)	23% (n=38)	15% (n=25)		

Table 1. Participant demographics

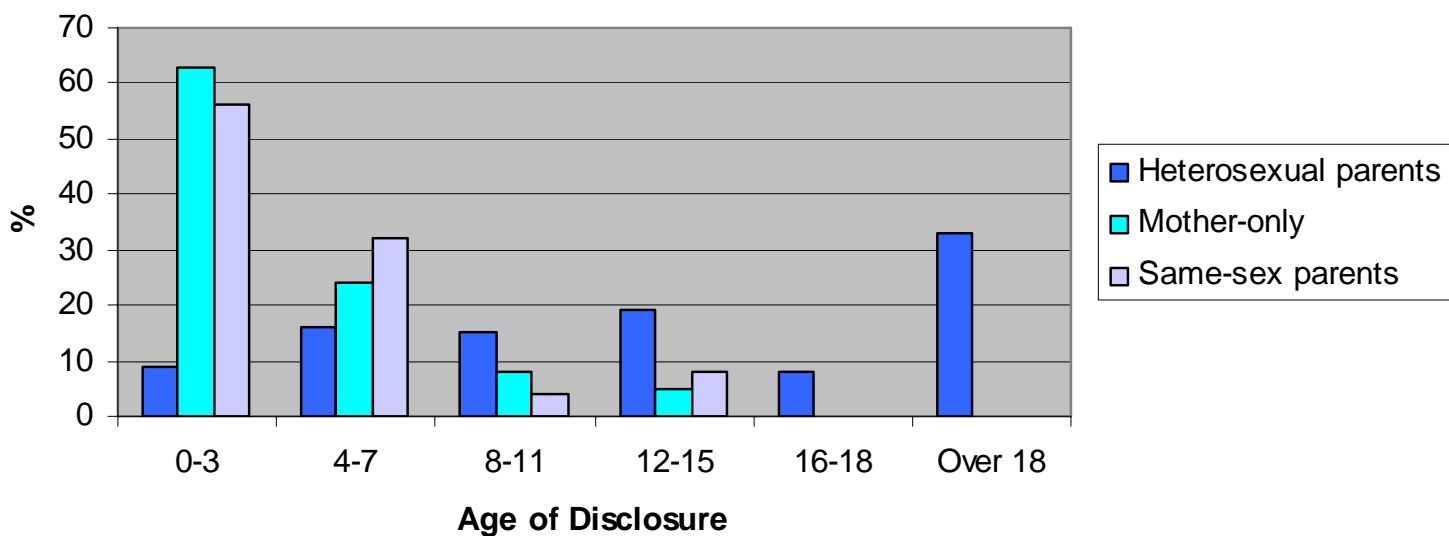
NB: Not all offspring answered all the questions, therefore the % does not always equal 100

AGE OF DISCLOSURE

Offspring were asked at what age they had found out about their conception.

Thirty per cent had found out before the age of 3 years, 44% had found out between 3 and 18 years, and 19% had found out after the age of 18. Looking at the different family types, it can be seen that only 9% of offspring from heterosexual families were told about their conception before the age of 3, compared with 63% and 56% of offspring from mother only and same sex families. Thirty-three per cent of offspring from heterosexual families were told of their conception after the age of 18, compared to none of the offspring from the other two family types. Thus disclosure patterns appear to differ between families with and without a father in the family home.

Fig. 1. Age of disclosure by family type

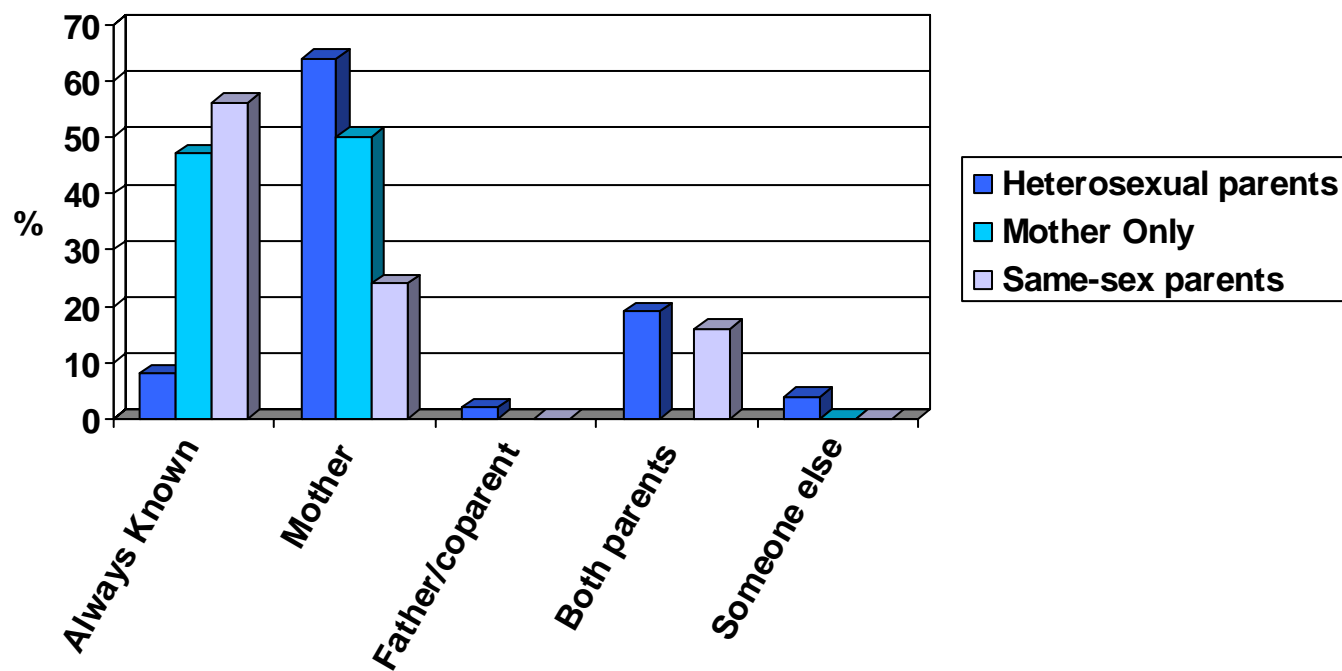


WHO OFFSPRING WERE TOLD BY

Offspring were asked who had told them about their conception.

Twenty-four per cent stated that they had always known, 55% had been told by their mother, 1% by their father, 13% by both parents, and 2% by someone else. Looking at the breakdown by family type, it can be seen that almost half the offspring of mother-only and of same-sex parents reported always knowing about their conception. This corresponds with the higher proportions of offspring from these two family types who reported that they had been told about their conception before the age of 3.

Fig.2. Who offspring were told by, by family type



RESPONSE TO DISCLOSURE

Offspring were asked how they felt about their conception at the time they found out. Those who had found out before the age of 3 were not included in the analysis as they were too young to recall their feelings.

Table 2 reports offspring's feelings from the most common, which is at the top, to the least common. At 72%, the most common feeling reported by all offspring irrespective of age was curiosity.

Comparisons were conducted between those told during childhood (from 4-11 years), adolescence (from 12 to 18 years) and adulthood (after age 18). The highlighted rows indicate the feelings for which differences were found according to the age at which individuals had been told of their conception. Those told during adulthood were more likely to report feeling confused, shocked, upset, relieved, numb and angry.

Feelings	4-11 n=51		12-18 n=31		Over 18 n=32		Total n=114		<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%			
Curious	36	71	20	65	26	81	82	72	n.s.
Confused	19	37	16	52	22	69	57	50	<.05
Shocked	14	27	18	58	24	75	56	49	<.001
Accepting	16	31	11	35	6	19	33	29	n.s.
Upset	8	16	7	23	14	44	29	25	<.05
Isolated	6	12	9	29	10	31	25	22	n.s.
Excited	10	20	8	26	6	19	24	21	n.s.
Relieved	3	6	8	26	12	38	23	20	<.01
Numb	3	6	8	26	12	38	23	20	<.01
Angry	6	12	4	13	12	38	22	19	<.01
Happy	7	14	8	26	5	16	20	18	n.s.
Indifferent	6	12	4	13	3	9	13	11	n.s.
Ashamed	6	12	2	6	5	16	13	11	n.s.
Content	5	10	6	19	0	0	11	10	-
Wish hadn't found out	2	4	1	3	1	3	4	4	-

Table 2. Feelings at time of finding out by age of disclosure

Offspring could write in their own words how they felt at the time of finding out about their conception. We have selected a few quotes to help illustrate our findings.

Examples of negative feelings

“I would have appreciated revelation of this information much earlier in my life. Learning of my biological identity at 17 years of age was a traumatic event.”

found out at age 17

“I am angry because I asked about being 'adopted' several times throughout my childhood and adolescence and told that I was being foolish. I knew.”

found out at age 50

“Either tell your kid from the beginning or don't tell them at all, it was one of the most shocking and upsetting moments of my life. I felt alone.”

found out at age 12.

Examples of positive feelings include:

“I was so young I don't remember feeling much more than interested and curious.”

found out at age 4

“...people always ask me, is it weird not having a father, or know your father? My response is, how can you miss something you have never had? I am no different than any other person. How we are born, doesn't make us who we are. I do not define myself by that trait. It is more of just how I came to be.”

found out at age 3.

These quotes illustrate the contrast in feelings between those who found out as young children and those who found out later in their lives.

FEELINGS TOWARDS MOTHER AT TIME OF DISCLOSURE

With regards to how offspring felt towards their mother at the time of finding out, offspring told in adolescence or adulthood were more likely to report feeling angry about being lied to and betrayal. Those told as children were more likely to state that it made no difference to how they felt towards their mother compared to those told later in life.

	4-11 n=51		12-18 n=31		Over 18 n=32		Total n=114		<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
<i>Feelings to mother</i>									
No different	28	55	13	42	5	16	46	40	.002
Appreciated honesty	9	18	12	24	13	41	34	30	.038
Angry at being lied to	6	12	9	29	15	47	30	26	.002
Betrayal	6	12	7	23	11	34	24	21	.047
Sympathetic	1	2	10	32	9	28	20	18	<.001
Loved them more	5	10	8	26	4	13	17	15	n.s.
Estranged	6	12	4	13	6	19	16	14	n.s.

Table 3. Feelings towards mother at time of disclosure

FEELINGS TOWARDS FATHER AT TIME OF DISCLOSURE

For offspring from heterosexual families, feelings towards their father at the time of disclosure were examined. There was no difference in feelings towards the father according to age of disclosure, although offspring who were older at the time of disclosure showed a non-significant tendency towards feeling betrayed.

	4-11 n=29		12-18 n=26		Over 18 n=32		Total n=87		<i>P</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
<i>Feelings to father</i>									
Angry at being lied to	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	1	-
Betrayal	2	7	7	27	10	31	19	22	.054
Estranged	3	10	8	31	7	22	18	21	n.s.
No difference	6	21	7	27	8	25	21	24	n.s.
sympathetic	12	41	9	35	11	34	32	37	n.s.
Appreciated honesty	0	0	2	77	3	9	5	6	-
Loved them more	5	17	4	15	9	28	18	21	n.s.

Table 4. Feelings towards father at time of disclosure

CURRENT FEELINGS

All offspring were asked how they feel currently about their conception. The most common current response was again curiosity, which was reported by 69% of offspring. Fishers exact tests were computed to compare those told before the age of 18 and those told after the age of 18. Significant differences were found for feeling angry, relieved and shocked, with those told after the age of 18 more likely to report these feeling.

Table 5. Current feelings by age of disclosure

Feelings	Under 18		Over 18		Total		<i>p</i>
	n=132		n=32		n=164		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Curious	89	67	24	75	113	69	n.s.
Accepting	60	46	14	44	74	45	n.s.
Content	36	27	4	13	40	24	n.s.
Happy	30	23	6	19	36	22	n.s.
Indifferent	31	24	3	9	34	21	n.s.
I've always known	27	21	2	6	29	18	n.s.
Confused	19	14	7	22	26	16	n.s.
Excited	18	14	5	16	23	14	n.s.
Angry	13	10	9	28	22	13	<.05
Upset	12	9	7	22	19	12	n.s.
Isolated	13	10	5	16	18	11	n.s.
Relieved	9	7	7	22	16	10	<.05
Shocked	1	1	4	13	5	3	<.01
Ashamed	2	2	3	9	5	3	n.s.
Numb	2	2	2	6	4	2	n.s.
Wish hadn't found out	1	1	1	3	2	1	n.s.

Again offspring could write in their own words, how they felt about their conception at the time of completing the questionnaire. Here are some of their responses. These quotes illustrate the tendency for those told when they were older to be more negative.

“It makes me feel physically sick to think that I have a Father/ Grandparents/ Half Siblings out there that I can never ever meet!”

found out at age 19.

“very sad that I will never be acknowledged by or have a relationship with my bio-father, half siblings and extended paternal bio-family”

found out at age 18

“Finding out at the age of 23 was earth shattering. I have so many questions and realize now that I may never learn more about the man who helped to create me.”

found out at age 23

These quotes illustrate the positive feelings of offspring who are aware of their conception from a young age.

“I am very happy with being donor conceived. I have no problems at all....all my classmates know about it.”

found out at age 9

“ I've grown up knowing how I was conceived. I've always been accepting to it because I never knew any different. Now that I am a little older the only thing that's changed is that I'm a bit more curious.”

told between 0-3 years.

CONCLUSIONS

Although this sample recruited through the internet is unlikely to be representative of donor conceived offspring in general, recruitment through the website has allowed us to access a large group of offspring who are aware of their conception.

The study has found that age of disclosure is important in determining donor offspring's feelings about their donor conception. It appears that donor conceived offspring respond more positively when told at an early age. This finding is in line with research on adoption which also shows that children benefit from early disclosure about the circumstances of their birth.

Importantly, in this study there were differences found between family type, with single mothers and same-sex parents telling their children from a young age. This is perhaps not surprising given that they have to explain the absence of a father. We found that the most common response given by offspring to learning of their donor conception was curiosity.

In light of the trend toward greater openness, it is important we recognise that telling offspring of their conception may evoke a sense of curiosity about their origins which could lead them to seek out their donor relations. In fact, as part of the present study but reported elsewhere, we have found that offspring show high levels of interest in contacting not only their donor, but also their donor siblings. Offspring from this study have gone on to find an average of 4 donor siblings, with a maximum of 13.