

# Telling It Your Way

A Guide for Parents of  
Donor-Conceived Adolescents

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## A Guide for Parents of Donor-Conceived Adolescents

THIS BOOK is for parents who may want to talk with their teenage children about having formed their families using donor-assisted conception.

Parents with children born from donated sperm or eggs are being encouraged by the Infertility Treatment Authority (ITA) in Victoria, Australia, to tell children about their conception. The ITA wants to support families and to help families make the decisions that are right for them.

Although this book was inspired by the needs of Victorian families who are on the ITA donor registers, it has been written to be of use to donor-conceived people and their parents in general, including those whose donors are anonymous, whether because conception occurred in Victoria before the 1984 Act or because it occurred elsewhere.

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# The story in this book

If your child is donor-conceived and was born in Victoria, there is a slight chance that the Infertility Treatment Authority could contact him or her once they have turned 18 to say their donor is seeking information about them. There are other ways your child might find out about being donor-conceived, no matter how careful you are or where the child was born.

Even those children who say they'd rather not know also say that if there's any chance of finding out they want their parents to tell them, not anyone else.

Once parents have decided to tell, they need to judge, on their knowledge of their children and their family, what is the best time and what are the best words to use. There is no recipe that suits every taste or circumstance.

Being honest is vital.

When telling adolescents, parents should acknowledge and adapt to what their children want, which might be different from what the parents would choose.

Parents should expect that their adolescents may react negatively, and be prepared to deal with them sympathetically.

It is important for parents to have come to terms with using donor conception because their attitudes will influence their children.

Parents should reassure their children that they love them no matter what their genetic connection, and make it clear that they are still their Mum or Dad.

It is wise for parents to let adolescents decide what they want to do about trying to find out about their donors. Parents can assist, advise, and guide.

Adolescents may need continuing support as they adjust to learning about being donor-conceived. Parents should be prepared for adolescents' attitudes to change over time.

Parents can make it easy for adolescents to seek informed help and advice outside the family, if this is what they want. Parents, too, can seek further help.

## It's never too late to tell.

This book can't provide a recipe for parents to follow because individuals, relationships, and families differ. It suggests guidelines and aims to help you to think about what might be best for your family.

The ITA provides information for donor-conceived people, parents, and donors. It also offers personal support to those who live or were conceived in Victoria.

# The legal context

Women and men who want to become parents can sometimes do so only by using donated sperm, eggs, or embryos.

In Victoria, Australia, legislation introduced in 1984 meant that sperm and egg donors could no longer be anonymous.

Victoria is one of the few jurisdictions in the world to legislate for identifying information to be available to donor-conceived people from the age of 18, and to set up a voluntary register for cases in which conception occurred before the legislation was enacted. The registers are administered by the Infertility Treatment Authority, an independent statutory authority that regulates the provision of assisted reproductive technology in Victoria.

The first group of donor-conceived people to whom this legislation applies turned 18 in July 2006.

It is also possible for donors to seek identifying information about people conceived from their donations. When a donor contacts the ITA, the ITA must try to locate the donor-conceived person and will write a letter asking whether they are willing to be identified to the donor. If the donor-conceived person is under 18, the ITA would approach the parents; if over 18, the ITA would approach the donor-conceived adult to seek consent and offer counselling to assist with decision-making.

The publicity given to the legislation has alerted many parents to the need to consider telling their children before they receive a letter from the ITA or before they are told by someone else.

It is estimated that fewer than 50% of donor-conceived people know how they were conceived. Reasons for keeping it secret include wanting to protect the child from feeling different or from distress if they can't find their donor; a sense of shame or embarrassment; not knowing what to say; or simply putting it off because the right moment hasn't come.

Young adults who don't know that they were conceived using donor sperm or eggs could find out from an ITA letter if their parents have not already told them.

For people affected by the 1984 legislation—*Infertility (Medical Procedures) Act 1984*—the ITA emphasises that the exchange of identifying information can occur only if both parties agree. If a donor or a donor-conceived person does not want to consent to passing on information, it will be withheld. The applicant and the person who is not consenting will both still have counselling available to them. People conceived from donor eggs or sperm under more recent law (*Infertility Treatment Act 1995*) can obtain identifying information about their donor without the ITA seeking further consent from the donor.

The ITA wants to give parents access to resources and the support they need to help them tell their children how their families were formed, before there is any chance of hearing from the ITA's letter. The ITA will support parents no matter what decision they make about telling.

# Families are diverse

Because there are many more adolescents who have been born using sperm donation than egg donation, the emphasis in this book is on donor insemination (DI). Most of the information it contains also applies to egg donation.

All kinds of families use donor-assisted conception. Although people quoted in this book may assume a heterosexual two-parent family, this is not the assumption of the Infertility Treatment Authority.

It is less likely that single women and lesbian couples will leave the discussion on conception to adolescence. When they do, the explanations about why donor insemination was used may differ from the heterosexual two-parent family, but the need to be honest with children and acknowledge their perspective still applies.

Information in this book should be of use to all families who have used donor-assisted conception.



# The quotations

The quotations in this book come from two sources:

- Discussions with groups of secondary school children in Victoria, none of whom was known to be donor-conceived
- Donor-conceived adults

Participants in the school discussions are identified by their year and sex. Details of the research from which the quotations were taken are on the following page.

Donor-conceived adults are identified by name and the age at which they learnt about their conception. The adults are identified and sources of quotations given on page 59.

# About the research with adolescents



Even if we could identify adolescents who don't know that they were conceived with the help of a donor, it's obviously inappropriate to ask them how they'd like to be told.

This is why we asked some secondary school students to tell us what they thought about it. Donor-assisted conception was a new topic to most of them, as it would probably be to many people who don't know that they were conceived that way.

Twenty-five students from years 8 to 12 (aged about 14-18) in two Victorian secondary schools participated in small discussion groups (confined to a single year level), with their parents' permission. The students were told about the Victorian law and the possibility of donor-conceived adolescents being contacted by the ITA if their donor was seeking information about them.

Discussion began with a story about a family with a teenage donor-conceived member, in which the parents had heard ITA publicity about the possibility that the donor could seek information about the child. Their son didn't know he was donor-conceived. Students were asked, "What do you think might happen next in this family?"

The adolescents talked about what mattered to them about the topic, rather than being asked detailed questions. Sometimes they discussed other stories with variations to the family structure; sometimes they maintained the conversation without extra stories.

The topic was clearly a difficult one for the adolescents to comprehend at first. In each discussion, it took some time for them to grasp what was involved in forming a family using a donor and what it might mean for parents to discuss it with their children. Our experience suggests that the responses of the students may be similar to those of donor-conceived adolescents.

Can you keep a secret?



## Children's rights and family knowledge

Adolescents hearing about donor sperm for the first time tend, on the whole, to think that donor-conceived people have a right to know about their conception, but that it's up to the parents when and how they are told. Some stress that it is family knowledge, not a matter of competing rights.

Donor-conceived adults who speak publicly about their conception are likely to say that it's their right to know about it.

"I suppose it would be fair for her to know; ... it's stuff that does affect her, so it is kind of her right to know. But again, when she should find out is up to the parents." (*Boy, Year 12*)

"They have a right to know because it's about them. It's about their upbringing, their genetics, their parents." (*Boy, Year 8*)

"I think it's up to the parents. It's their choice." (*Boy, Year 11*)

"They should have a right to know that their father's some person that's donated sperm and not the one that they thought they've known all their life. It's like they've been living kind of like a sham." (*Boy, Year 8*)

"I think for it to all work, you know, like for the children to find out, you know, successfully and stuff, that it has to be the family together. You know? It can't be parents versus children. It has to be—" "A unit." "I think it's not only affecting the children, either. It's also affecting the parents in making the choice to tell their children, and their children's reaction to them. So I think it has to be a whole family thing." (*Girls and boys, Year 10*)

"I was 33 and about two months pregnant with my second child when I learned ... that I was a donor offspring. ... My terminally ill godmother told me what I had figured was a wild tale about my mother having me through 'artificial insemination'. I hadn't wanted to believe it. My mother had been outraged by the notion. ... My oldest brother finally corroborated her story. ... I was at once shocked and strangely relieved. I grieved to learn that my beloved dad was not my biological father. I felt utterly betrayed that my mother had failed to come clean when my godmother first revealed the secret. ... My mother wishes the whole DI business would go away. She feels intense loyalty to my dad. She is very upset that I would like information about the donor. ... I regret that my mother didn't tell me, at least after my dad's death. ... Cancer, arteriosclerosis and heart disease are rampant in his family, while my mother's family has almost none. ... Even when my step-sister died of pancreatic cancer, my mother kept mum." (*Melody, donor-conceived adult*)

"I think it is essential to tell the child the truth of his origins. ... We can accept our conception. It is the deception that creates trauma for us." (*William, donor-conceived adult, told by his mother at 37*)



## Disclosure can be difficult

It might be difficult for children to learn that they were donor-conceived. Some adolescents say they'd rather not know; others point out that children have a right to know even if they're not happy to receive the information.

This suggests that parents who have put off telling their children in order to protect them, or because they find it difficult to know what to say, might discover that their children have some understanding of their reasons.

"I'd prefer that my parents didn't tell me." "You're naïve." "Yes, I am naïve. But also I respect my parents so much and I really love them, and if they told me that, it would change the way you think about them." "I think the whole problem with it depends on who the child is, and depends on the situation of the family." "They said that they'd all prefer to be told now. I wouldn't." (*Boys, Year 9*)

"I think, regardless if there's a chance or not [of someone else telling], they should tell him. ... Especially if they've already been saying, 'Oh, well', you know, 'We really should and just the time never cropped up', and especially, I mean, the longer it goes on the harder it will be." "Exactly. I mean, if it's already an issue as such, even just for the parents, I think it's for the best that they know, as difficult as it may be, I think." (*Girls, Year 10*)

"I don't think I would want to know very much. It doesn't seem that important." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"If there's no one to, you know, send me a letter saying, 'Oh yeah, I was your sperm donor' or whatever, you're better off just living life as you are. I mean, if you're happy, I don't think you need to know." (*Girl, Year 8*)

"It's her right to know but you've got to take it into consideration that she might find out and wish she had never found out. Like she might not want to know about something like that." (*Girl, Year 8*)

## Secrets can be hard to keep

Adolescents might discover that they were donor-conceived even if their parents don't tell them. Parents would be wise to consider this when deciding what to do.

"I think if, like, someone else knows and you think it might slip, like even if there's like a one percent chance, you should definitely tell them." (*Girl, Year 9*)

"You don't want them finding out in a science class: 'Oh, what colour eyes do your parents have?' you know." "Isn't there, like, a cleft chin thing as well, in biology?" (*Girl and boy, Year 9*)

"They shouldn't have the expectation that their children will never find out. ... It's going to vary. It is going to be different. So you can't just ignore it when you're trying to make the decision." (*Boy, Year 11*)

"Can you imagine having a blood test in your adulthood only to discover that your blood group doesn't match that of either of your parents? Or even worse, discovering the secret from family friends, or in the middle of a heated argument?" (*Lauren, donor-conceived adult, told by her parents at 9*)

Children want their  
parents to tell them





If there's a chance of children finding out, at any time and from any source, adolescents agree that it's best to learn about it from their parents.

"I'd be really angry if my mum hadn't told me." "And you just heard from someone random at some point." "Yeah, but I'd still be really angry if she told me now." "I'd still want to hear from my mum first."  
*(Girls, Year 11)*

"I'd hate to be the child that found out in a letter that, you know, my dad didn't have enough sperm to produce me so they had to use some [donor sperm]." "You'd probably disrespect them more if they didn't tell you themselves and they let a letter tell you." *(Girls, Year 10)*

"I'd rather find out by my parents." "They should both be there. Both parents." "I think I'd definitely want them both to tell me." "It would hit me a lot harder if I found out by someone else."  
*(Girls and boys, Year 8)*

"I wish my parents' attitude had been healthy enough that they could have spared me the anguish of having it sprung on me by a third party. I am sure that the 'secret' would have surfaced eventually, because it turns out that most of my extended family had known about it from the very start. I cannot adequately describe how it feels to discover that everyone except me had known. I realise that they were protecting me (and my mother and dad and perhaps themselves) and that intentions generally were all good." *(Melody, donor-conceived adult, told by her godmother at 33)*

"I think ultimately it is best if parents told, but even a letter is better than not knowing at all. ... Receiving a letter is better than the information perhaps coming up via an argument or in a not-so-nice way."  
*(Narelle, donor-conceived adult; told by her parents at 15)*

# The best age to learn



The discussions with adolescents were based on the law in Victoria and emphasised telling teenagers or young adults. Adolescents often found it hard to imagine what it would be like to grow up knowing about it. Their ideal ages ranged from “very young” to “when they have their own children”, although the majority moved towards having it known from a young age.

Throughout the conversations adolescents emphasised that parents needed to draw on their knowledge of their children, especially if they plan to communicate with a teenager.

“I’d rather be told young so, like, it’s not a shock. Like you grow up and you learn more about it as you grow up. You know, like you’re told and then as you’re older you [understand].” “Imagine, like, a smaller child, like, understanding that their father is not the, like, real genetic father.” “But they wouldn’t say, like, ‘I’m not your real dad’, because they’d say, ‘I’m your dad,’ and I don’t think ‘dad’ is defined by a sperm.” (*Girls, Year 11*)

“Should they be told when they’re older and they’ll understand, but the emotional stuff might hit them a bit harder? Whereas you can tell them when they’re younger but there’s a risk they won’t totally understand it then, either. So it’s kind of like, it depends what age you want to tell them.” (*Girl, Year 8*)

“I just think it’s a shame that they had to wait ‘til he was 18 to tell him. ... I personally think it’s kind of like, ... if you’re adopted, I think it’s best if the child knows just from day one. So as they’ve always grown up with that.” (*Girl, Year 10*)

“I think ... it would be easier to tell kids younger, ... because at that age—” “They’re more accepting.” (*Girl and boy, Year 11*)

"I guess older might understand more because they're more mature, so they could sort of see it from the adult perspective." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"I think the age that we are now would be a really good age to do it: ... My reason for thinking to do it when they're 14, 15, is because at that stage we're mature enough to understand but also at a point where it's not going to affect our lives completely. Because Year 9 is very—we don't have big things like exams and things like that to worry about. So it won't completely affect our lives if we take it too seriously." (*Boy, Year 9*)

"This obviously has to be dependent on the person, ... but I'd just prefer that they didn't tell me at all. But if they did, I'd actually prefer that I was older. Because if I was this age now and they told me, I wouldn't be able to deal with very well. ... I value my childhood a lot and I think that would really, really sort of dampen it. ... Whereas when you're older, it's possibly that you've got your own job, you live away from your parents. If they tell you then you're sort of more mature to deal with it, yeah. That's personal just for me, though." (*Boy, Year 9*)

"At 18, it's kind of a coming-of-age, so I think that, you know, if not before then, I think 18, you know, that could be something that the parents say as well." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"I'm not sure about age but I'm sure older would be better." "Maybe when they're older and they've got a family of their own, they can see how much they love their own kids and know how much, how desperately, they wanted them." (*Boys, Year 9*)

"Of course, when you're still told it would be like, 'I've been deceived'. ... And teenagers would say, 'Why couldn't you tell me when I'm older?'. Older people would say, 'Why couldn't you tell me when I'm younger?' " (*Boy, Year 9*)

"What is best for the child? To find out when they are young and still developing their personal identity, or to be a confused adult who discovers under earth-shattering circumstances?" (*Lauren, donor-conceived [DI] adult, told by her parents at 9*)

"I think the age when I was told worked pretty well. Somewhere in high school, when they can understand what it means." (*Marta, donor-conceived [DI] adult, told by her mother at 15*)

# Preparing to talk



The best preparation is to know your child.

“Try and make sure you know how your kid’s going to react beforehand and prepare for it.” “Know your kid.” (*Girls, Year 8*)

“The parents have got to know how to deal with that and when to not intrude.” “Yeah, they have to know their kids.” (*Girls, Year 8*)

Children will be influenced by their parents’ attitudes; it’s important that parents have come to terms with having used donor-assisted conception. At the same time, they need to accept that their children might see the matter differently.

“I don’t think they should be ashamed that they used donor sperm.” (*Girl, Year 10*)

“Before, like, anything is talked about, make sure that they’re themselves clear with what they think, but then don’t force that on the children, you know. It’s like, leave it open for them to have their own opinions and everything.” (*Boy, Year 10*)

“I wouldn’t want to know about it if I thought my dad was worried about how I’d feel about him. I reckon you’d be able to sense it as a son or a daughter; you’d be able to know, ‘Hey, my dad’s feeling slightly insecure; I’ve just got to make sure that he still knows I love him and that he loves me and that’s all fine’.” (*Girl, Year 8*)

“It’s about the kid and not the parents, in the long run.” (*Girl, Year 8*)



Adolescents can appreciate that it might be difficult for parents to know how to talk about donor-assisted conception.

"I think it would just be hard no matter how you said it." (*Boy, Year 8*)

"There's never a right time to tell." "But ... there has to be a time where you should be able to tell your children that sort of thing. But I know it would be very hard to tell your kids something like that." (*Girls, Year 10*)

Parents might need support or counselling, perhaps from a source listed at the end of this book, before they speak to their children.

"I think the parents should go to counselling or something. Because the dad probably has a reason and that's probably because of the insecurity, thinking, probably, 'I don't want my kid going off with some other guy'." (*Girl, Year 8*)

"I think the parents should see someone before they tell her so they know where they stand." (*Girl, Year 8*)

Although parents might want reassurance from their children and even be expecting it, they should be prepared that their children might not be able to reassure them right away.

"The parents would be, you know, absolutely scared that this meant that their child would stop loving them the same way. So, whether they would actually get reassurance, as I'm pretty sure you wouldn't give it straight away, the parents would definitely want it." (*Boy, Year 9*)



## Choosing the occasion

It's important to plan the first conversation about donor-assisted conception, including: Where and when will it take place? Who will be present? Who will initiate the conversation? What information needs to be conveyed? What is the story about our family, the story that is bigger than donor-assisted conception?

"If both parents are there, then both parents should break the news to the child." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"I imagine that they would probably try and set it up to be somewhat more, like, formal. They wouldn't just give it as a passing remark. Although that might help. Like, if it's formal, if you put too much pressure on it, then it might seem a bit too contrived." (*Boy, year 12*)

"You'd want to be told in person; like, you know, sat down and said, 'Well, you know, we've got something important to tell you, etcetera.' But really, there is no easy way of saying this. So that would be the best way." (*Girl, Year 9*)

"Just sort of saying it slower and not just saying it all in one big sentence. Just taking time with it. And, yeah, I wouldn't want any gifts or anything like that." (*Boy, Year 9*)

"I think you've just got to take him out for a nice dinner. And say, 'Well, we've got something that's probably, you know, will really change your life but, you know, we've got to tell you now.'" (*Girl, Year 10*)

"The less of a big thing it's made, as an event, the less it will be seen to be a huge thing." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"I think it's not only affecting the children, either. It's also affecting the parents in making the choice to tell their children, and their children's reaction to them. So I think it has to be a whole family thing." (*Boy, Year 10*)

"They'd have to give them, like, a lot of space. ... They'd probably have to tell them then leave them alone for a little while. Just let them like absorb it." (*Boy, Year 8*)

"Tell her at the right time of the month!" (*Girl, Year 10*)

"How to tell? I haven't got the vaguest idea. I think if my mother had not just couched it so much in fear. If she had just told us straight away, perhaps taken us to a nice park and worked up to it. Instead, she said she was going to tell us something and that it was really big and that she was scared about it. She kind of built up to it for a few days. We thought it was something really bad, so when she finally did tell us we thought it wasn't so bad. I guess it depends a lot on the family and upon the kids." (*Marta, donor-conceived adult, told by her mother at 15*)

## When there are donor-conceived siblings of different ages or when not all the children are donor-conceived

Donor conception can more easily be understood as a matter for the family as a whole if everyone knows together. Most of all, the donor-conceived person shouldn't be the last to know.

"If they kind of didn't feel it was right for Kylie [aged 15] to know at this age and they wanted to do the same thing with her, then I suppose that they'd have to tell Paul [aged 17] not to tell Kylie. Like, you would have to tell Paul that Kylie was also donor-conceived, I imagine, because obviously there would be questions raised in his mind about, 'Is my sister actually, like, my sister?' You know, all of those family questions. ... [But] this is really a prime opportunity to tell Kylie as well, I think. And if I were a parent and for some reason hadn't told Paul already, I would definitely now, when telling Paul, also tell Kylie. ... I would tell them both at the same time." (*Boy, Year 12*)

"I think if one sibling knows then the other one has to as well." "I think it would be easier to take it, like, together." "Exactly. Because ... it would feel like they weren't, you know, completely alone or anything if that did happen, you know. And if it was all together as a family I think it would just be much better." "Worse came to worse, they would still have each other." (*Girls and boys, Year 10*)

"It could cause a really big gap, like, if Kylie found out when she was 18 and finding out that Paul had known for two years or three years or so, that'd be really hard for her and she would drift apart from him as well as the parents." (*Girl, Year 8*)

"I just think that would make the child suffer so much if then she found out that everyone knew except for her. It would just make such a big burden to deal with. ... And you'd just feel like everyone betrayed you." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"The important thing is, once it's broken to the kids, you've got to make sure you all stick together." ... "It's a big experience for everyone in the family, not just for the kids. Like, they'd [the parents] have to have that hang over them for their whole life, knowing that one day they'd probably have to tell their kids that and they're probably dreading it a little bit." (*Girls, Year 8*)

# Communicating about donor conception



It's a good idea to work out what you're going to say. The opening sentence needs to be planned. After that, if it's clear in parents' minds what it means to them, and how glad they are that they were able to build their family with help from donors, they will be well placed to discuss it with their children and answer their questions.

[Parents could say] "We thought you might have liked to be born." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"Well, maybe they should, like, discuss the topic of being donor conceived. Maybe they should, like, sit them down and say, look, because it says here that they have, they read in the paper that all this is happening, so maybe they should sit down and say, 'Look, this issue affects you more than you may think', and then sort of ease them into the topic and then say, 'Look, this is what has happened but blah, blah, blah, we still love you', and you know, all these lengths that they went to, to have them." (*Girl, Year 10*)

Adolescents want their parents to be honest with them and give as much information as they can.

"I can't really imagine another way of saying it other than being straightforward and saying, you know, 'I'm infertile so we had to use this donation'." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"It should be honest and straightforward, and the reasons should be outlined, and as much information as you can give them would be good." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"For parents to tell me like, you know, they couldn't have kids or something like that, then it would be okay. So there's no really need to have anything else. Just knowledge." (*Boy, Year 9*)

Adolescents want their parents to reassure them that their love is solid and won't diminish.

"Just say that they are their parents, but that the actual sperm came from a donor. ... Like, 'We are your mum and dad and we always will be'. And, like, making sure that the child understands that this is not going to change the relationship that they've had for the past 18 years." (*Boy, Year 12*)

"Kind of reassure him that, you know, that they actually are the parents though, you know, so, like, not to feel any different. You know? 'Because we still are, as we always were, your parents, and this is just another factor'." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"Well, I think if you go to the trouble of insemination and whatever, it's because you really, really want to have kids and you want to bring them up as well as you can. You can't—it's not like, oh, malicious." (*Girl, Year 11*)

Parents need to take care to differentiate the parent from the donor.

"I think it would help a lot of the parents did make it clear to their children that, when they told them, that definitely the donor had only been a donor just to father a child. Not to be there, not to be a parent or anything." (*Boy, Year 10*)

The parents' attitude is an important influence

"Because the way it's presented to them, that's the way that people present it to anyone else." "And, like, see you're not given a negative view on it or, you know, an overly positive view. It's just kind of like, 'That's the way it is'. Let people make up their own minds. Everyone has their own opinions, but I think, you know, when parents are telling them it shouldn't be in the hush-hush way because then it does sound like, you know, there's something wrong with it or it's a bad thing. ..." "I think the way it's presented is incredibly important, no matter what the age. If it's presented as 'This is a really taboo topic', then they'll think of it as a really taboo topic." (*Girls, Year 11*)

But parents need to accept that adolescents will find their own meaning for being donor-conceived, and may take a long time to process the information.

“Before, like, anything is talked about, make sure that they’re themselves clear with what they think, but then don’t force that on the children, you know. It’s, like, leave it open for them to have their own opinions and everything.” (*Boy, Year 10*)

“I mean, as much as it’s going to, you know, incredibly make them worry and make the parents anxious, it’s the kid that’s going to take it on and take it with them, kind of, for their life and have to, you know, use the knowledge. ... I guess, it would just, you know, change the way they look at the world a little bit. So it really is, I think, much more important that the children have the control of the conversation and it’s not just being, ‘Well, this is what, you know, the truth is; deal with it’. Kind of constantly asking your kids what they think and what they’d like to do and how, yeah, how they want to deal with it. Because it’s not really about, you know, the parent enforcing how they’re going to recover from it all.” (*Girl, Year 10*)

## Being honest includes explaining why they haven't shared this information before —

"We tried to tell you but, you know, it was really hard for us." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"And just about the whole, you know, telling them; how do they explain not having told them for, you know, 18 years or whatever it is? I think it's important that parents can say, you know, 'Well, I wish that we had and we did make a mistake'. Because I think if they're trying to, you know, to solve it all and still be, you know, the loved parents who never made a mistake, the role models and, you know, the people who you look up to. And they should be able to say, 'Well', you know, 'we wish we had been open with you about it but we didn't and we're really sorry about that'." "It would also make it that much better for the children to, you know, to understand, if the parents did think that, you know, that what they did was really not the right thing. It would be easier then for the children to kind of understand that and think, you know, they're kind of coming down to my level, you know. ... It would kind of just smooth things over, I think, if they were ever to say that." (*Girls, Year 10*)

"If my parents were going to tell me, I think I'd want them to say, 'We didn't want you to be burdened as you were growing up'. Like at this age especially, when you're going through puberty and stuff, and mental stuff is still hitting you, and everything." (*Girl, Year 8*)

"Ideally you wouldn't say because you were embarrassed. ... Because, I don't know, if they feel embarrassed then wouldn't that make the kid also feel like he should be probably be embarrassed as well about that sort of thing? And that makes them, I don't know, maybe a bit less comfortable." "I reckon they shouldn't just say, 'We were embarrassed', but they should explain why they feel a bit embarrassed. Because if they just say, 'We're embarrassed', that could mean, 'We're embarrassed of letting people know that he's not the actual father'." "Yeah, instead of saying that I was embarrassed because of himself not being able to do it but not because of you." "Emphasise the fact that they're not embarrassed about having you through donor sperm; he was embarrassed because he couldn't do it himself. But the fact they went to those lengths to get you, I guess, is what they should sort of emphasise, I think, in like their speech." (*Girls, Year 10*)

## — and why they're talking about it now

"They basically just have to make it clear that the reason they've decided to tell them is because they love them and they want them to know the truth. That's kind of like a lie; ... because, I mean, how loving them you could not tell them as well." (*Boy, Year 9*)

"You could also say, 'Well, you're 18 now, and we think you're ready to know the truth. Yeah, that you're mature enough to handle it.'" (*Girl, Year 10*)



# The adolescent's response



Adolescents respond to learning about their donor conception in a variety of ways. School students imagine what it would be like and donor-conceived adults remember:

“Who you are is more your upbringing.” “Yeah, and it’s your personality and your experiences.” “But physically it is half of who you are.” “Unless they’ve had a totally crap life and every second has been absolute agony for them to exist in, then they can stop complaining, you know. Like, they live in a good—as long as we’re talking Australia—yeah, they live in a really good country, they’ve got all opportunities that other people don’t have, and they’re alive and they can take full advantage and not just complain about being lied to.” (*Girls and boys, Year 11*)

“Some people think that, like on TV in all those drama shows when people find out, they go crazy and they try to find their real parents and they, like, never speak to their parents again. But really, that’s not what really happens. Like, you obviously aren’t going to just disregard 18 years of your life.” (*Girl, Year 10*)

“My mother did not tell me of my origins until I was 37 years old (in 1983), a few days after the death of my younger DI brother. ... I was confused, angry, relieved, hurt and embarrassed and yet full of sympathy for my parents. ... I had long suspected that my dad was not my genetic father. ... I was most surprised that my conception was DI not from adultery, as I had assumed as a teenager. So my long-time shame about my mother vanished but was replaced by anger that she had not trusted me with the truth.” (*William, donor-conceived adult*)

The adolescent’s response will depend, to some extent, on the quality of existing family relationships and communication patterns.

“It depends on the people, the relationship between the parents, and all that sort of stuff.” (*Boy, Year 9*)

“I think, like, the children would know that their parents still love them. ... Unless you’ve got a really bad relationship with them.” (*Girl, Year 9*)

Differences in circumstances—such as family structure, personality, age, maturity—will contribute to differences in responses.

“It really depends on the temperament of the child.” (*Boy, Year 8*)

“If you just moved or something and you’re just trying to settle in again, that would really concern how you’re feeling.” (*Boy, Year 9*)

“All these situations are very different. We’ve got, like, the single mum and sort of happy family and then we’ve got this one who’s got a son from the first husband, a daughter from the second one; it’s like, they’re all very different. And I think they handle it in different situations.” (*Girl, Year 8*)

**An adolescent’s immediate response might be negative: anger, a need to get away.**

“Be prepared for, ‘Oh, my god, I hate you! How could you not have told me?’ And they probably don’t mean it.” “Yeah. It’s the overwhelmingness.” (*Girls, Year 8*)

“Like you’d feel, you know, very betrayed, obviously.” “If you’re lied to.” (*Girl and boy, Year 9*)

“In some cases the children would be angry and they’ll just kind of shut them [parents] out.” “That they haven’t been told.” “They’ve been lied to, kind of.” “And that they thought that someone they loved wasn’t their blood. That they were conceived by someone else they don’t know.” (*Boys, Year 8*)

“She could get really angry.” “Or she could get extremely emotional.” (*Girls, Year 10*)

“It could be possible that, you know, in extreme cases, because of the way teenagers think, that they just sort of run away. ... That children would actually decide that it’s such a big shock that they just want to get out and they just want to leave.” (*Boy, Year 9*)

“In the short term, either he’ll be relaxed, like he’ll be fine about it, and still, you know, have that love and things for his parents. But he might turn out to be really angry, because he is a boy. ... If he does get angry then it will be a short-term anger period, I think. But in the long run he’ll appreciate what his parents have done.” (*Girl, Year 10*)

There's likely to be some degree of confusion, shock, embarrassment.

"I guess if they're at this age [late teens], it kind of makes it more difficult for them to know, and they might just have their little period where they don't know, you know, who their father is and that kind of thing. ... They might have an identity crisis or something, whereas if they know from the start I just think there's so much less to deal with." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"I would be so shocked, and feel embarrassment. I'd be like, 'Whoa! Slow down.'" (*Boy, Year 8*)

"The big deal is that you thought your dad was this, like—even though it kind of is your dad, but you thought that he's always been the one who's conceived you and then suddenly you found out that he wasn't. You'd feel like kind of a gap from that relationship. But then once you'd thought it through, then it would actually come back to you and you'd realise that they've been your dad your whole life and they still are." (*Girl, Year 8*)

"I think the only reason that it's so, like, such a big deal is because it's not—well, it's common but it's not something that's—it's just the same as anything else. Like if something doesn't happen, if something's new, new to you, then it's always going to be bigger. It's the same deal. It's because you've never heard of it before and most people, like, most kids probably don't know much about it and then all of a sudden it's sprung on them and they realise, 'Wow!' You know, 'I'd never thought of that before'." (*Girl, Year 8*)

"I'd find it really, really difficult to sort of be around them and things like that. ... I'd just find it extremely awkward, because they've told me this, and this is not something to be taken lightly. It's a really big part of someone's life if they're being told this. And, you know, if they told me, there'd be so many things to think about and it would take up so much of your time just thinking about, you know: Do I want to find out who my real father is? You know, all this time my parents have, you know, not told me. I would be thinking as well, I wished they hadn't told me." (*Boy, Year 9*)

"For the first, like, probably day, I probably wouldn't want to talk to them." "At first I would need the time to think about it and just let it sink in." (*Girls, Year 8*)

At some point, adolescents are likely to need to have more information.

"I would imagine that the child would have more curiosity on the subject. Like how it actually happened. Unless they completely oppose the idea where they just, like, you know, they create a wall. They would probably want to, like, have a bit more of a dialogue on that. Why did they, you know, choose to use that method? And, like, was it impossible to use any other methods? Like, how did they go about it, I suppose. Like, that's just stuff that the child would want to know about, I imagine." (*Boy, Year 12*)

"You've just found out you've got a whole other person who is actually so close to you genetically and you don't know anything about them and you just, all of a sudden—I think all these questions hit you, and that's what's the big deal about it. Just knowing, 'I've got this whole new person in my life and I don't know a single thing about them'. Yet we should, we should know about each other, because we're that close genetically." (*Girl, Year 8*)

Some adolescents may just accept the situation; others may reach acceptance later.

"I wouldn't like them any less if I found out." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"Maybe the family had, like, some genetic disease in its history, then you wouldn't have to worry about it any more, on your dad's side. I wouldn't have problems of it." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"I think that'd probably overcome the fact that I was donor-conceived. ... If my sperm didn't come from my dad I wouldn't think that he's not my real dad. Even though it wasn't his sperm. It's still my mum's sperm. So, you know, still there's that connection. So I wouldn't think, 'This isn't my biological dad'. I'd sort of think, look, okay, someone else's sperm was used so my dad and mum could have me." "They love me enough to do that." (*Girls, Year 10*)

Adolescents may understand and empathise with their parents.

"They really must have wanted to love someone besides themselves to actually want to do that."  
(*Boy, Year 9*)

"I don't think they'd lose respect for them. If anything, why not gain respect for them because they went out of their way to have you? That they would go to that length. Like, I'm sure it wasn't comfortable for his dad anyway, ... having to use someone else's sperm to have your own child."  
(*Girl, Year 10*)

An adolescent's response to knowing about being donor-conceived may change over time.

"I think the situation would just lighten and it wouldn't be such a heavy burden any more once it really sunk in and you're, like, okay." (*Girl, Year 8*)

"The only lingering emotion I have from my mother's disclosure thirteen years ago is regret. ... I regret that my parents did not have the courage or insight of DI parents today who choose to share the truth with their children. I regret the lost chance to have lived a life in openness. ... It would have been wonderful." (*William, donor-conceived adult, told by his mother at 37*)

# After the first conversation



How parents deal with their child once having told them will influence the continuing relationship. It's important that parents adapt to the needs of the adolescent, maintaining the stability of life while acknowledging that something significant has occurred.

"They [parents] should sort of make a big deal out of it, but once they've sort of had the discussion, they should just go on, sort of, as they had before. So they're acting like nothing has changed, even though it has changed. ... They can still, like, talk about it but still do the things that they used to do."  
"Yeah, but that would kind of make the child resentful because, I reckon, because if you just see your parents go back to the normal way they lived before, they would act like they didn't care ... how the child was feeling." "I reckon it would be, like, how emotional the kid's like. If you can see that they're really distressed about it, sort of thing, you talk about it, which they are. They'd still be fazed by it; if they weren't that fazed you'd sort of just continue, like, within normal." "You wouldn't need to press on it too much. Like be all in-your-face and, 'Oh, are you alright?' each morning. 'How are you feeling?' and stuff. It's just being there and, like, acknowledging that it's happened and this is a big thing."  
*(Girls and boys, Year 9)*



## Should it be a single telling or a continuing conversation?

The best approach seems to be to make it easy for the child to ask questions but for parents not to keep bringing up the subject.

"Show the child that they're very willing to talk about it. Like, you know, even though for them it isn't anything big and it's just what they did and what they had to do to have kids that they have ... loved through their life. Like, you know, they understand how important it is to talk about something like that. But not say it like, 'We have to talk about it now'. Because ... some children probably will kind of take it in and not have too many other questions. ... I don't think the parents need to push having a dialogue on it, but definitely keeping the door open for further discussion." (*Boy, Year 12*)

"I would want them to tell me clearly and, you know, concisely, so I didn't get muddled up and then kind of never speak about it again. Just kind of—" "Answer the questions." "Because I wouldn't want to talk to them about it because they're not people I would talk to, like because it's concerning them. I'd want them to, you know, say, 'Talk to this person and if you want to talk to us then you can'. But not for them to force it, you know." (*Girls, Year 9*)

"I think the children should feel comfortable to be able to ask their parents more about it and kind of, I don't think the parents should necessarily hassle their kids to talk about it or anything." "From then on I think it's all up to the kids, I think. Because if they want to know more about it, then the feeling has to be that they can ask whatever they want." "Don't hassle them to bring it up. And also don't, like, kind of avoid talking about it either." "Just be straight, you know. If one of the kids asks you a question about it, then—" "Answer it truthfully." (*Boys and girls, Year 10*)

"Wait until the kid brings it up." "If they're not bringing it up then they're not comfortable about talking about it yet. It's just not worth bringing up." "In time the kid will come to the parents." "Some people would come right out and just ask about it but others would be more subtle." (*Girls, Year 8*)

"Now that they've got it out in the open, I think then it's now not them any more, it's the children. So they've got it off their chest; now the kids have to deal with it in their own way. So I think they should sort of let it go and ... then go to their aid if they need help. ... Tell them, 'Look, we're here if you need us but like, you know, it's up to you how you want to deal with this. We just wanted to tell you because we love you and ... you needed to know this'." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"Since he's nearly, like, 18, giving him the respect to be able to deal with himself will probably also make him feel better about himself and, yeah, more of an adult so he could probably be able to, like, think it from their point of view because they have, like, treated him that way." (*Girl, Year 10*)

## It's not fair or wise to ask children to keep donor conception a secret

Parents might want to ask their children to keep donor conception a secret, but this is likely to be harmful rather than helpful.

"I think that's a terrible thing to put on a child after she's found out. 'Oh, we'll give you this but you can't tell anyone else'. I think it's a really unfair demand that the parents are making. Because after all it's her life, essentially." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"It might make her feel like there's something wrong with her. Like she's not as good as anyone else." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"They can't expect her to not share that with anybody. ... If I was her I would definitely need people to talk to. I couldn't not do that." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"To dump something that big on a 14-year-old and ask her to keep it to herself, I think that's just unfair."  
"It's up to the kid. If they want to tell other people then they can. I don't think the parents can say, 'You can't tell anyone'." (*Girls, Year 8*)

"I think, 'Don't tell people at school' is fair enough." "I think they should, like, have a choice who they tell. Like, it's their business. The parents should kind of like back off. If they need to tell people at school, like their close friends, then they should feel that they're able to. Like it's their own choice." (*Boys, Year 8*)

"I think at that age, being worried about that she'll be teased is just completely irrelevant. She won't. Like, just from what I've experienced at this school, she won't. People would tread really lightly around it. Never make jokes, might even be worried that they say the wrong things at times. ... I think kids are a lot more sensitive than people think we are." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"I think secrets in general tend to hurt people. And I think this one would hurt her because, at 14, or at 18, this is something you're going to want to talk about and your parents may not be the appropriate people to talk about it to. You may want someone who is removed from the situation and I think it's her right to talk to anyone she wants because, it is her, and it's her business, and it's her secret." (*Girl, Year 11*)

# Genes and parenthood



Adolescents aren't going to stop loving their parents because they find out they've been donor conceived.

"I don't think I'd lose respect. Maybe they might lose respect because of the whole trust thing, but I think they'd still love him if he was there during their childhood." (*Girl, Year 9*)

"If I found out that my dad—I'd probably still love him just as much, it's just I'd want to get to know the other person as well." "You couldn't say, 'Oh, you're not my real dad so I'm just not going to talk to you because your sperm didn't help make me so you can just get out of my life'." (*Girls, Year 8*)

"Some people don't have very good relationships with their fathers. Like, I have a really good relationship with my father, and if I was told that he wasn't my real father I sort of wouldn't care. I'd be like, this is the guy that, you know—" "Raised you." (*Boys, Year 9*)

## Dad and Mum are the real parents

Although adolescents used the term ‘real father’ for the sperm donor when they began to discuss the subject, they acknowledged Dad as the real father. It’s difficult to know what words to use for such a new idea. Parents need to have thought about the implications of the language they use and to choose words with care. This applies also to mothers who have used donor eggs and given birth to their children.

“I think the relationship is more important than the genetic connection.” (*Boy, Year 10*)

“I suppose it also depends on the kids and how much value they put on parenthood and genetic makeup, what they’re actually made from. If that’s not an issue, especially if they don’t really look like their parents anyway, they’ve known that since they were a kid.” (*Boy, Year 11*)

“Genetics doesn’t really make who you are.” “Yeah. The rules of genetics doesn’t really make a father as well. The father is the person who’s there from the start, who raised you and teaches you, you know. And there’s just some other man who happens to be your biological father.” “Genetics just makes your body, it doesn’t make who you are. It doesn’t make your mind. ... It doesn’t define what personality you have or how we’ve raised you and the morals that you have.” (*Boys, Year 9*)

“The donor is the biological father and technically a real father, but I think, in a discussion telling the kids that, about the donor, I think you’d call [the dad] the real father.” “Yeah, he’s a real parent.” “I agree with that, but I think saying outright, you know, [your dad] is your real father, that sort of does imply that he’s the biological father. You know? You’d have to make it very clear, you would definitely have to make a difference. ... He’s your real parent or, you know, your dad, you know.” (*Boys and girls, Year 10*)

"I also reckon that you'd be thinking of this guy ... as your dad for so long, it would take a while for you to think, 'Oh, wow, I have another dad'." (*Boy, Year 8*)

"I don't think Dad is defined by a sperm." (*Girl, Year 11*)

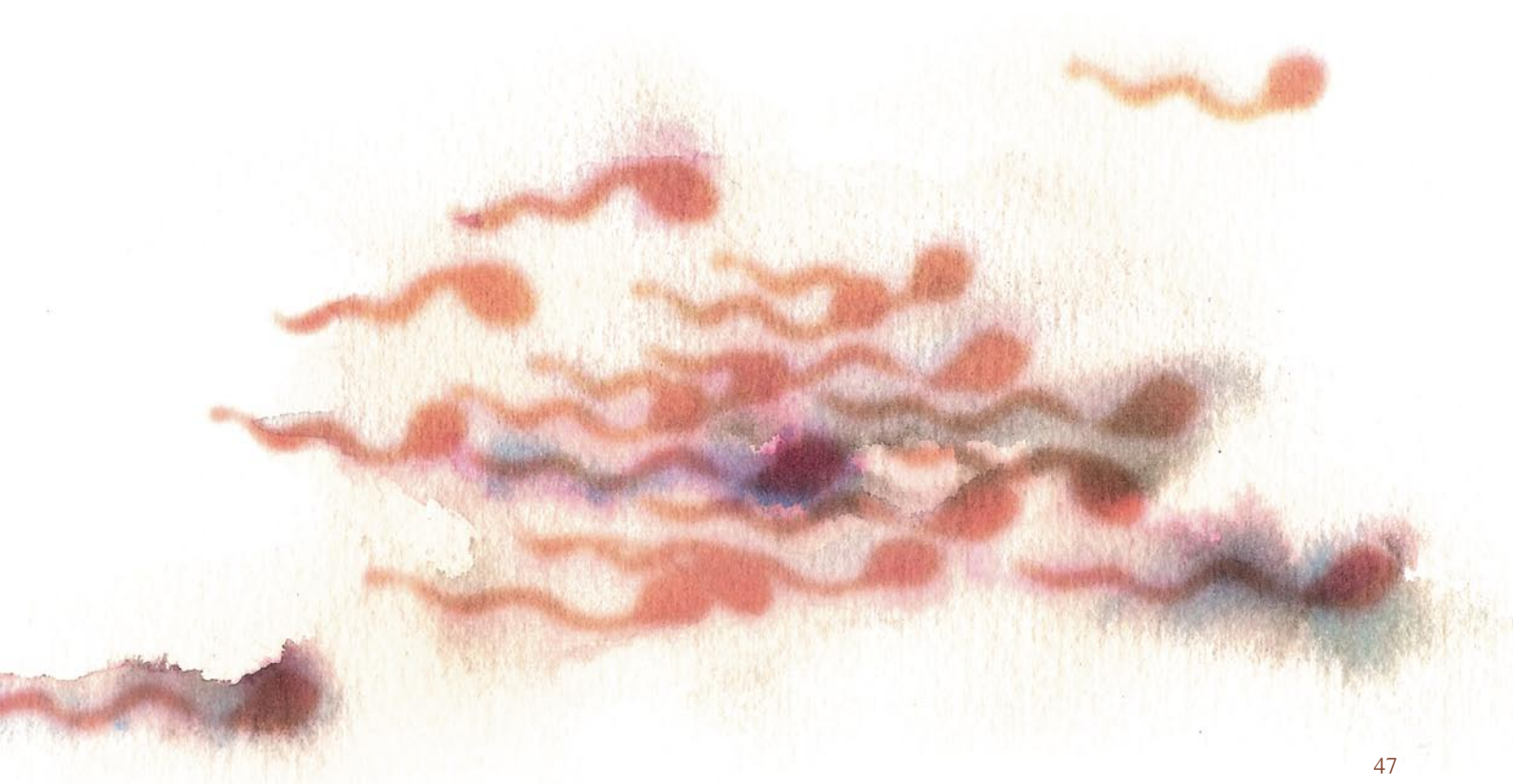
"'Real' is just kind of a generic term for biological. It's not, you know, got anything to do with their real emotional dad." "I was using it the other way. I think, you know, the real father is the one that's raised you." (*Girls, Year 11*)

"I don't think there should be such thing as a real dad. I don't think that should be a choice they have to make, and decide which one of those guys is their actual father. I think they should just be able to get to know the real one, if they want to." (*Girl, Year 8*)

"I don't think in all honesty that a child would stop loving him because, you know, he is the father no matter—you know, okay, sperm or no sperm, he is the father of the child. He's been there throughout the life. Like, you can't just say that, well, you know, 'Your sperm isn't what produced me'. I don't think that would stop them from loving him, like loving the father." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"Depends on the family and that family's definition of the father. Is the father someone who's been there the whole time and always been there for the children when they needed them and stuff, or is it just someone who technically, you know, has the DNA, same DNA and all that? So I think one thing: it depends on the family and their views on the subject." (*Girl, Year 8*)

# The sperm donor



## What can we call him?

As well as understanding what they would like the donor to be called, parents need to be prepared that their adolescent children will have their own ideas. This applies to the egg donor as well as the sperm donor.

“I wouldn’t use ‘real father’.” (*Girl, Year 9*)

“I think ‘biological father’ for the donor, because you know, no matter what, [the dad]’s still going to be the father because he’s raised them to, well, 17 years, you know.” “And he’s offered the love and support and the care.” (*Boy and girl, Year 10*)

“I know people who have been donor-conceived, that were donor conceived, and they have, you know, friendships with their donors, so to speak. And they call them by their first names, just as an acquaintance, as a friend, you know. And that’s just much easier than calling them Dad or something, you know, like step-dad or just—you know, that can all just get a little bit awkward.” (*Girl Year 10*)

“Families would have to work it out.” (*Boy, Year 8*)

“I think you’d probably call him ‘donor’, so it’s like you still think that the man that you live with is your father. You don’t have to—this guy isn’t the father that you want to become attached to. You still want to stay with the other one.” (*Boy, Year 8*)

“Maybe ‘biological father’ or ‘donor’. Donor’s probably the best.” “I would probably lean towards ‘donor’.” “‘Donor’ has no mental perceptions in it. For instance, it doesn’t conjure up any images of fatherly type.” (*Boys, Year 8*)

“I would openly ask the children, you know, ‘What would you prefer?’ you know, ‘How would you want to look at this person as?’ you know. ‘What kind of connection is there?’” (*Girl, Year 10*)



## Knowing about and knowing the donor

Some adolescents would want to meet their donor, some would just want to find out all about him, some think they wouldn't be interested in him, and others don't know what they'd want to do. It could change over time.

Adult donor-conceived people tend to want at least identifying information about their donor and extended family, and possibly the option of meeting him or her. It's hard when information isn't available.

Adolescents need understanding and support from their parents and acceptance of their need to know. What they want to know could differ among donor-conceived children in the one family.

"I think the most important thing is that they've got their really open, compassionate relationship with their parents. That should be of the utmost importance. And I guess it really depends on the donor in question and how that relationship's going to be—that's a whole other story." (*Girl, Year 10*)

"Even if you weren't going to live with him but you just want to know who he was and what—. "See if you've got things in common." "I think that they [parents] should arrange something so that you can meet them [the donor], and be there when you need them." "But they shouldn't be holding your hand." (*Boys and girls, Year 8*)

"They might never hear from them [donor]. But if they get the opportunity, I think they should be able to take it and just see how it goes." (*Girl, Year 8*)

"Because I love my father so much, I don't want to know my other father. I'm happy with the parents that I have. ... But of course there would be different situations." (*Boy, Year 9*)

"Well, if I was a donor child, I wouldn't really want to know the donor. I just wouldn't want to think about it. I just wouldn't want to know, really." (*Boy, Year 9*)

"I think [parents would] have to make it very clear that—not to get her hopes up, that she might never meet this man, and she couldn't get a replacement father or anything from him." (*Boy, Year 10*)

"It might just be a huge complication. Like you've never met this person and they're kind of like another father. It's ... an extra relationship that's totally confusing." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"I think I should know about them. Like, what they like, what they do, what they do for a living, where they live, what they do in their spare time, what their favourite colour is. I mean I wouldn't want to know them." "Just general stuff to see if you've got anything in common and if you can see any similarities, and I think if you did see similarities it would be sort of interesting." (*Girls, Year 8*)

"If you were a different, like, background and, like, if you were—I don't know how you'd take it." "If you found out that you and your real father were, like, a different religion, different culture or that, spoke a different language, you'd just want to know about things like that because it would be fascinating and everything." (*Boy and girl, Year 8*)

"I think that everyone should be able to have contact with their biological parents." (*Narelle, donor-conceived adult; told by her parents at 15*)

"When I was 18 I attempted to track down information about my biological father. The information which I feel is important to me includes: medical history, racial origins and physical characteristics; whether he and his parents are still alive; and information concerning half-siblings born through donated genetic material and through other relationships. In this category I seek information about: the number of half-siblings, their age, gender, and whereabouts. Yes, my list does include updated information. For me the link with my donor does not just stop at the time of my conception. Information about the donor's entire life should be consistently updated until the offspring wish to access the information, and even after that time." (*Lauren, donor-conceived adult, told by her parents when she was 9*)

"I think it is preposterous that anyone would expect me not to wonder about and want to know who this man is. ... This does NOT mean that I desire a personal relationship with the donor or his family members. ... I do not imagine or wish for a 'replacement' father. ... My curiosity is mainly genealogical in nature: a 'family tree' project, if you will." (*Melody, donor-conceived adult, told by her godmother at 33*)

"Most parents fear that the child's need to search will frustrate him and hurt his self-esteem. Some fear that a search means they have failed as a parent. An adult searches because it is natural to want to know your heritage, not because he rejects his parents. ... I feel that the child, at age eighteen, should have the right to know the donor's identity and meet him without any obstacles from his parents, the clinics, society, and the donor himself." (*William, donor-conceived adult, told by his mother at 37*)

# Family resemblance



Sometimes people comment on resemblance or lack of resemblance within a family where donor conception has been used. Families might find it helpful to develop strategies to deal with this.

"The only way to really deal with it would be to hit the nail on the head and just come out and say, Look, my father is not actually my biological father, so that's not—'." (*Boy, Year 9*)

"You could even lie and say, 'Yeah, don't my eyes look the same'." (*Boy, Year 9*)

"If the child knows, it would be very, very awkward and I think each family would have their own way of sort of dealing with it. But if it was just the parents, if they knew and they watch people saying, you know, 'He looks so much like you', I think they're just going to have to deal with that. If they haven't told their child." (*Boy, Year 9*)

"[If I met the donor] I think I'd ask them to stand in a mirror next to me. And I'd be like, yeah, 'I think I've got your nose'. I think it would just be a whole, it would be interesting, but scary. It would be very confronting as well." (*Girl, Year 8*)

"I don't know; with me, I'd take a light-hearted approach. I mean, every family's different but every time someone said that in public, ... Mum and I might have a quiet giggle or something. I don't know, I just find it, this whole argument, a bit strange, really. It's just a sperm. Like, it's tiny. It doesn't make a huge difference." (*Girl, Year 11*)

"My parents told my brother and I about our conception when I was 9 and he was 12. Our parents sat us down and said, 'We have something important to tell you.' To this my brother's immediate response was, 'I'm adopted, aren't I?' This illustrates the fact that, when secrets are kept, the children often grow up sensing that something is different within their family. The funny thing is that this is not necessarily due to what their parents do say, but as a result of what the parents don't say. For example, they never say, 'You've got your father's eyes and your grandmother's personality'. ... In my family we are very comfortable with the situation of my conception. In fact it is often the subject of humour and jokes. My brother and I often use the donor as a scapegoat and the source of our less attractive traits! I'm quite sure I must have inherited his nose because I didn't get Mum's small one." (*Lauren, donor-conceived adult, told by her parents at 9*)

What support might  
adolescents need?



Some adolescents might need support from sources other than their parents. They should be consulted about it rather than having their parents make decisions for them. They might also want this support to be confidential, without the need to report to their parents that they have been seeing a counsellor or calling a help line.

Donor-conceived adults often report that they have benefited from meeting other donor-conceived people.

"They would probably want to talk to their parents a bit more about it. ... And maybe, if that didn't clear things up enough for them, ... if there was some sort of, like, donor forum or something. Like some sort of talk group ... who don't necessarily need to be, like, too close to the family. ... If there was some sort of call centre or help line. ... I'm not sure if you should necessarily go to a psychiatrist over it, but definitely someone else who has been donor-conceived. If they have further questions about how to cope with it, probably people who have had a positive outlook to it rather than people who are angry with the system. To just to talk to, to kind of help a bit." (*Boy, Year 12*)

"I think the parent would have to understand that the child, like once you've told them, they'd have to have a lot of space and you might want to recommend, you know, being able to talk to someone that knew about it or, you know, a school counsellor or that sort of thing. Or a friend that you really trust. Because obviously they may not know much about, like, what it is and that sort of thing." (*Girl, Year 9*)

"I reckon the option should always be there, even if they don't, like, want to use it. Again, it depends on the kids, but let the kids know that that option is there but they obviously aren't forced to use it. And so, like, if there was a counsellor, for example, give them all the details of the counsellor, like the number and all that stuff, and say, 'If you would like to use this resource, please use it; we will not think any less of you because you're not coming to us. We respect that you want to talk to someone else about it'." "Or the other view on that is if you tell them about counselling, it might make them get really scared and think this is a really big issue." "If you said, 'Look, this is a counsellor', they'll go into, you know, shutdown. ... They might start thinking, 'Why is this such a big problem? I don't need to see a counsellor, I'm fine', you know. And they might start to make them think this is a bigger issue than really it is." (*Girls, Year 10*)

"Parents might even sort of accidentally-on-purpose leave the pamphlet on the kitchen bench and just pray they walk past." "The kid might not want the parents to know that they want the counsellor or something like that." "Even if you just said, 'Here's the number, I'll just put it on the fridge. You can call it if you want but I don't want to know about it. Just do it when you want to', or something. ... If they know they can do it and they're not going to be interrogated about then it shouldn't be a big deal." (*Girls, Year 8*)

# Further information

A range of information is available on the Infertility Treatment Authority's website: [www.ita.org.au](http://www.ita.org.au).

The ITA can also be contacted within Australia on 03 8601 5250 for information or to arrange a meeting with a counsellor.

The Donor Conception Support Group of Australia can be found at [www.dcs.org.au](http://www.dcs.org.au) as well as via the ITA website. Email: [dcsg@optushome.com.au](mailto:dcsg@optushome.com.au).



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- An interview about the ITA Telling campaign, broadcast on the SBS program *Making Babies*, 30 May 2006:

**Narelle**      Narelle Grech

- *Let the Offspring Speak: Discussions on donor conception* (1997) published by the Donor Conception Support Group of Australia Inc.:

**Lauren**      Lauren, pages 25-29 in *Let the Offspring Speak*

**Marta**      Marta Kallstrom, pages 43-44

**Melody**      Melody Ward Leslie, pages 39-42

**William**      A. William Cordray, pages 35-38

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This book is for parents who are thinking about telling their adolescent children that they were conceived with the help of a donor.

Maybe you've heard a donor-conceived adult say that it's a child's right to know  
Maybe you've decided that this is the right age  
Maybe you've heard that the donor might be seeking information about your child  
Maybe you're concerned that they will find out some other way  
Maybe you just wonder whether or not to tell

Inside this book you can read what adolescents and donor-conceived adults say about "telling", and learn about other sources of information.

"I'd want to be told now. ... If they'd already decided [to tell me], you know, I'd want them to choose, like, now to tell me. Like, as soon as they were prepared to tell me." (*Girl, Year 9*)

"He will always be their father, biological or otherwise, but still their father that's raised them." "You don't have to be biological to be a father." (*Boys, Year 8*)

"I think if the person has reached 18 years and the parents have still not told them, that they are an adult and they have a right to know they are donor-conceived and that is their true identity." (*Narelle, donor-conceived adult; told by her parents at 15*)

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