

Writing your first letter

February 2017

Your introductory letter or email is often the first form of contact you have with someone to whom you are connected by donation. It is best to write a short message that gives some information about you, your motivation, and your hopes about future outcomes.

What should I say?

You may find this may be one of the most challenging letters you will ever have to write. It is hard to know what to say. However, it is important that you write in your own voice and are honest about what you think and feel. Keep it simple and real. Let your personality shine through.

Manage your expectations

It is difficult to know how the other person will respond to your first communication. Some people are quite private and reserved while others yearn to meet their genetic relatives. Until you have had contact with the other person you cannot know how they will respond. Think about your best and your worst-case scenarios - hope for the best, but mentally prepare yourself for the worst.

Introducing yourself

This may be the first information the other person has received about you. It may also be the first contact they have had with a person to whom they are connected by donation. As you do not know what kind of involvement they wish to have with you it is perhaps better to keep your introduction simple. Consider sharing why you are interested in knowing more about them. You may have already received some non-identifying information, giving you an opportunity to write a few short sentences about what you know or to identify something that the two of you have in common.

What will you call each other?

The terminology surrounding donor conception has not yet evolved enough to describe these kinds of relationships. It is difficult to know what to call each other. The kind of language you use will develop over time with greater ease if you establish a relationship with each other. Knowing the other person's first name can help ease the awkwardness. If you do not know this, you could perhaps address the letter to: 'Dear donor', or 'Dear donor child'.

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Be clear about your motivations

What is it that you want from this situation? Why have you contacted them? It is helpful for the other person to understand this and what you would like to happen over time.

Respect the other person's wishes and feelings

It is good to be open with them as to what you would like, but do not force your ideas upon them. It is likely that one or both of you may be feeling some trepidation about the situation - better to tread lightly in the beginning. You may each prefer to correspond by letter or email for a while before meeting. It is important to reassure each other that you respect each other's feelings and wishes about future contact.

Maintain your boundaries

Remember that you do not know this person yet. While you may be genetically linked to them, this does not mean that you will get along. Until you get to know one another it is best to avoid sharing private information. It is up to you whether you want to include a photo of yourself. Be aware that the more information you provide the more the other person can access information about you online. In the early stages of contact, you may wish to change the privacy settings on your social media accounts.

Navigating first contact

It is likely that you will both be feeling excited yet vulnerable at the early stages of getting to know one another. Maintaining your boundaries is always wise but it is also helpful to be as emotionally open as feels comfortable. You may want to let the other person know a little about yourself too: what you like to do; your personality; and how your life has been so far. Take things slowly and carefully.

Keep it simple

Keep the first letter light in tone and short. If you are inclined, humour can be a good tool to ease the intensity of a situation or lighten the mood.

You do not have to say everything straight away. While you are likely to be curious, it is best not to ask too many questions. Identify a short list of questions you would like to know the answers to.

It is also okay to ask for an updated medical history.

Gaps in communication

The other person might take a while to reply. While you may have been thinking about contact for a long time, it is possible they will need time to digest things or have other pressing issues in their lives. They might also be having difficulty writing a response.

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Sensible precautions

Remember you do not know the other person. While they are most likely honest and genuine, it is sensible to take the usual precautions you would normally follow with strangers.

If you are ready to take the next step

After corresponding for a while you might like to exchange phone numbers. If this goes well you may then want to meet. It is a good idea for your first meeting to be on neutral ground, such as a café or park.

The first meeting is usually exciting and nerve-wracking - try to relax and be yourself. Remember the other person will be feeling nervous too.

For further information:

Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority

Phone: (03) 8601 5250

Email: dcrs@varta.org.au

Web: www.varta.org.au

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Sample: Letter from a donor-conceived person

Dear Donor,

My name is Laura and I believe that I have been conceived as a result of your egg/sperm donation. Over the years I have thought a lot about what to say to you. There is so much I would like to tell you. I would like to firstly thank you for donating and giving me the gift of life. Without your help my Mum and Dad would not be parents and I would not be here.

I also want you to know that I am not asking or expecting anything of you. I hope my letter does not cause you any distress. I do not wish to create any disruption in your life or to intrude on your family. If you do not wish to have contact with me, I will understand. I would appreciate some information about you as I have a lot of questions about where I come from.

One day I would love to meet you, but that is entirely your decision. Perhaps we could correspond for a while and get to know each other. I would be very interested to know about your medical history, what you are like and whether we share any similarities in personality, interests or appearance.

I imagine you might have some questions about me too. I grew up believing I was the biological child of my Dad. When I was around 15 years old, my parents explained that they needed the help of a donor to have me. I am now 34 years old. I married a wonderful man, named Dave, 7 years ago. We have 2 beautiful children, Sarah who is five and Ben who is two. I work as a nurse part time and I enjoy swimming and reading.

Ever since I knew about you, I have thought about you and wish you very well,

Laura

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Sample: Letter from a recipient parent:

Dear Donor,

I don't know how to begin to thank you for the unique and precious gift you have given me. I am a 37 year old single woman and thanks to you I am now a mother to my cherished daughter, Olivia, who was born in May this year.

There are no words that can express the gratitude for your kindness and compassion. It takes a very special person to help someone that you don't know and have never met.

Saying thank you doesn't seem enough. I look at my beautiful daughter and think about how my life has changed since I have had her. I now can't imagine my life without her. I can assure you that she will be loved and well looked after. If you would like, I am happy to send you a photo of her.

If you would be interested in having updates as to how my daughter is going, I would be only too happy to send you an annual letter on her progress. If you would possibly feel comfortable to meet one day in the future so we can thank you personally we would be keen to do this. No pressure! I will respect whatever you and your family feel comfortable with.

I sincerely hope your life is as full of happiness as the happiness you have given me,

Best wishes and thank you again,

Olivia's Mum, Linda

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Sample: Letter from a donor

Dear Donor Daughter or Son,

I wanted to let you know that over the years I have wondered about the people who may have been born as a result of my sperm donation. Are they happy, healthy and well looked after? Do they know they were created with some extra help from me? Do they want more information about me – my medical history, my personality and interests and my appearance?

Perhaps it would help you to know why I donated. I was a young person at the time. The clinic was looking for donors. I had some understanding of infertility because I had close friends who were having trouble becoming pregnant. I wanted to help people who wished to have children but could not do so. Since then I have married and had children of my own but I never forgot my donation.

I just want to let you know that I am happy to give you this information and to possibly meet if you would like this...or not. I am comfortable to do whatever you would like. I am very conscious of your feelings and also, of your parents' wishes and certainly don't want to intrude. I am very clear that I am not your parent and I want to reassure them and you that I don't want to take on a parenting role as you have these already.

I wish you all the very best in your life,

Chris