

Lesbian mums and known donors or dads

Some lesbians use a known donor to create their family, rather than using an anonymous or identity release donor available through a fertility clinic. That donor may be someone already known to them – a friend, colleague or acquaintance – or may be someone sourced for the specific purpose of being a donor or a dad.

Some men may donate to a lesbian friend with the stated intention of being involved in an ongoing, co-parenting relationship where they are clearly identified as the child's father. Other men, however, donate with no wish to be involved in parenting in any way.

The language used to describe the donor or father in any of these circumstances may vary and can include 'dad', 'donor dad', the donor's first name, or 'uncle', or some variation. The names, the relationship between all parties, and

the role and responsibilities of the donor or father are unique to each family.

This topic provides some advice and suggestions that may be helpful to potential lesbian mums and donors or dads when deciding whether they might be a good match for each other. Maintaining a positive ongoing relationship between everyone involved is extremely important whatever the circumstances, but is especially so where there is a co-parenting arrangement.

Matching mums and donors or dads

The process of lesbian mum(s) and a donor or dad coming to a positive and workable agreement can take many months and involve lengthy and detailed discussions.

It can be helpful for all parties to discuss the issue with a professional counsellor at various stages of the process, both individually and as a group.

Writing a detailed agreement can help everyone clarify their expectations and make sure mums and donors or dads are thinking along the same lines.

Important factors to discuss might include:

- the donor or dad's level of involvement in the child's life
- his role in decision making
- the role and expectations of his extended family
- financial matters
- expectations of education, religion and core values.

It is advisable to see an appropriate family lawyer to clarify the legal rights and responsibilities of everyone involved.

It is important that all parties discuss the matter with their general practitioner or a fertility expert and undertake appropriate health checks.

It is advisable for everyone involved to give careful consideration to the name or title ascribed to the donor or dad.

Some factors that may contribute to positive relationships between mum(s) and donor or dad are:

- a high level of trust and a capacity to communicate openly and honestly
- an ability to manage change and conflict
- a solid grounding of shared values and priorities
- holding the other person in high regard and seeing them as a 'good person'
- a level of emotional maturity.

The expectations, feelings and needs of everyone involved often change over time, and especially once the child is born and the discussions are no longer theoretical, but about a real person. Successfully managing these changing expectations can be fundamental to ensuring positive outcomes for the family and, most importantly, for the child.

Parents say ...

Making a choice

The girls and I had known each other for a few years through our mutual involvement in a club. I saw a counsellor independently and we also saw a counsellor together. The whole premise was that the girls wanted their child to know their father and that the father would have some involvement. **Brad**

I started writing a list of who would be happy to give me sperm and not be a parent ... I asked people who I thought were trustworthy and potentially open to that scenario: good men who were happy to be known to the child purely as a donor. There was no question in my mind of having a father.

Lesley

I feel really lucky that we met a donor who had similar ideas, and lives in a different state and has a very bachelor lifestyle; an older guy not really interested in having a toddler around, but very happy to be available and come to birthday parties, and who loves showing him off. **Joanna**

The agreement was that he would be happy to be known if and when the child wanted that, or if and when I thought it was an appropriate time. So it was very clear that I wanted someone who was doing it for altruism, as a favour, not because they wanted a child. **Lesley**

We met and spent about three or four hours together and we just drank coffee and talked and talked. He was doing it for the right reasons; he wanted to have a child, but he didn't want to be a full time parent and that suited me fine at that point. **Maryann**

For me, as a dad, I recognise that I have a son who I don't have all the time, and for some men that's not going to be acceptable. Where you are on that spectrum of your involvement is probably a question for all parties to consider. **Brad**

It was always important to me for the kids to know who their donor was because I'm adopted. I don't know my biological parents, so I just really felt this strong need for them to know where they came from because I don't. **Kate**

I thought, if someone else hadn't donated for us we wouldn't have our child, so I said, 'Yeah, I'll do it, but we'll really need to talk about how this is all going to work'.

Rodney

My initial reaction was excitement and I almost had to restrain myself; it's all well and good, but let's think about what it really means. What would it look like? What would my involvement be? What would be the repercussions of such a decision? **Brad**

Nobody made assumptions, or presumed they had entitlements, I suppose. We probably had similar values and David is really clear that he doesn't have decision-making responsibility. **Susan**

The process

They [the prospective parents] had a copy of some Rainbow Family guidelines which were really useful and, even though it wasn't legally binding, we came up with a written agreement – a kind of symbolic contract between us – and it helped clarify our expectations.

David

You know, that bit of paper that we wrote our agreement on has never been looked at again. You write it and you won't need it. You don't write it and you'll wish you had. **Susan**

We had a contract which wouldn't be worth the paper it's written on legally, but we've always both stuck to our end of the deal and he's always done what he said he would do.

Maryann

A few months after we'd first met David we'd gone overseas for a month-long holiday so we'd really had time to think about it. We'd met him in a variety of places, out at a restaurant, with his partner, without his partner and at our house. **Susan**

We used a lawyer to produce a memorandum of understanding or whatever the term. I'm mindful that none of that is legally binding, but it was a very helpful process and it would be foolhardy not to do it. The things we covered were levels of involvement – time and financial – legal issues and how decisions would be made. **Brad**

Susan is so methodical and we didn't want to leave anything to chance. We found this person who looked interesting and had the same sort of values and beliefs and we organised to hook up. Susan was very particular about meeting several times and making sure we got to know him and then writing the contract. I think perhaps because we did it so meticulously, it all seemed to work. **Kate**

The other thing we did before trying is that he went off and got a whole lot of medical tests to confirm a clean bill of health; checks for STDs, sperm count and that sort of stuff. **Susan**

He'd already done all the tests – sperm count and medical tests – so then we did the next lot of tests three months later, and six months later, and he came back clean so then we started.

Maryann

It was more than a year between meeting him and starting to try to get pregnant, which I think was the right thing. **Joanna**

I think it's worked because we talked about everything from the start. I know heterosexual couples who don't know half the stuff I know about Mark! I made a very conscious decision to have a child; it took me a lot of work and effort and planning. **Maryann**

I think the process we underwent at the start helped because I was flying blind, so to speak. The guidelines document was great and then just meeting them and talking; I told them what I wanted and they told me what they wanted. **David**

Thoughts and suggestions

Seek the input of as many people as possible; the advice of professionals and friends and family. *Mandatory* is a strong word, but you'd be well advised to do that. **Brad**

For anyone considering a co-parenting arrangement, I'd say get professional counselling – separately and together – because you need to understand why you want to do it and that your emotions are going to change once that child is born, because they will.

And you need to learn about how the other person feels and about how this journey is going to work. The journey will not work like it says on paper; it's an emotional journey. **Rodney**

The overarching understanding I still live with is that as long as we can negotiate, and as long as we are all reasonable people and can have these conversations and appreciate there are always going to be differences, we'll be okay. **Brad**

If you don't want your child or other people to think of your donor as a dad, then really think carefully about whether to use that term. **Lesley**

Situations and expectations will change. The reality of the child being in the world is different to the discussions you have where it's all theoretical, so you need to be able to cope with changing circumstances. **Brad**

There is an element of luck, but there's also an element of maturity and education and self-awareness. **Rodney**

We have a known donor who is a dad, but not a parent in the sense of having responsibility. His role is to build a nice relationship with the kids and to have a nice time with them. Our relationship is much closer, I think, than we envisaged. We would see him anyway; he has become part of our family. **Susan**

I think it's worked well partly because he's a really nice, decent person and because we're nice, decent people and we're all reasonable. I think no one had ideas that were so fixed that they weren't moveable. **Susan**

For co-parenting, I think you would need to be really careful. You would need to know the person well and have a really good capacity to talk. You wouldn't pick them willy-nilly. **Joanna**

What kills these arrangements is fear and conflict; when it all becomes about the parents and they forget it should be all about the child. That's why I think counselling is so very important, because it can help you refocus on what this whole thing is about. **Rodney**

You know, it's not a little project. It's something that lasts your whole life, so you want to make sure the person you're having the child with, in whatever way, is the right person. **Maryann**



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