

Talking about your donation

February 2017

From anonymity to openness

Prior to 1988, sperm and egg donations were practised anonymously. Donors and parents who used the donations rarely told others about their experience. As society has changed and become more open, this practice has changed. Parents are encouraged to tell their child about how they became a family with the help of a donor. Donors are also advised to be open about their donation to their partner, children, and extended family - especially as donor-conceived people or their parents are likely to apply for information about them.

It is common for people to delay having conversations which feel personal, difficult or awkward. However, delays can make the situation worse as the information you are struggling to discuss may be learnt through other channels and it may seem that you have chosen to withhold this information.

Having the conversations

It is good to pick a time when the family is relatively calm. You may want to practise what to say or discuss your thoughts with a VARTA counsellor. You may be nervous but it could help to remember when you first became a donor, and how your generosity enabled people to create their families. Many people view donation as an incredibly generous gift of life.

Talking to your partner

You may have donated before you were in a relationship with your partner so naturally, you were unable to take their views into account.

Many partners are comfortable and supportive of their partner's donation and encourage contact with offspring and their family. Some partners may feel jealous, hurt or angry that a donor helped create another family with someone else. Some may fear being excluded if donors have contact with the offspring, or wonder where they fit in. They may also be concerned about any potential impact on your relationship with your children (if you have them). This issue can be challenging for partners who have not had children. For partners who wanted children but have been unable to have them, the fact that someone else has had children who are biologically yours can be difficult to process.

These initial feelings and concerns are normal reactions for partners. Time and discussion helps everyone work through this stage. Partners may have different reactions before and after a donor-conceived person receives a donor's information.

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It is important for your partner to know:

- research shows that most donor-conceived offspring do not want or expect the donor to have a parental role¹
- donor-conceived offspring have no legal right to make a claim on your estate
- why you donated
- how many offspring you have, ages and gender (if you know)
- your thoughts regarding whether you wish to exchange information/have contact with your offspring
- reassurance that your relationship with them or your children will not diminish because of any contact.

Excerpts from ‘A donor wife’s perspective’*

The most important consideration for both of us was “how did I feel about all this” and we definitely did not want this person to become an unexpected member of our family.

It turned out a few children had been born with my husband’s help but only one wanted to know her biological father.

We were helped very much by the excellent counselling service available (from VARTA) once we made the decision to go ahead.

Our feelings towards this girl are of an affectionate nature but definitely not a father/daughter relationship. Those feelings are simply not there and it suits all of us.

Was it worthwhile going through this? I would say definitely, the girl is happy knowing her donor father and we are happy knowing her and her family and none of our initial fears have come true. It is a nice relationship.

* Visit VARTA’s website for complete version.

Talking to your children

Children’s reactions vary depending on their age as well as personality. Younger children usually take the news about donor-conception in their stride, respect their parent’s act of generosity and tend to cope well with the information and welcome it. Take a lead from their response, offering more details as they ask questions and check whether they have understood what you have told them.

Teenagers or adult children may respond in various ways. Often they need time to absorb the news, understand how it will affect them, and come up with questions for you. They generally need time and space. Some may be unhappy, or not understand your choice; others may find the news exciting and may be keen to connect with your donor offspring.

Scheib J E, Ruby A, Benward J. 2016. Who requests their sperm donor’s identity? The first ten years of information releases to adults with open-identity donors. *Fertility & Sterility*, 107, 483-493.

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It can help to:

- practise what you want to say before you talk to your children
- involve your children's other parent if appropriate
- choose a time which is relatively stress-free for your child
- speak to them at home rather than in an unfamiliar environment
- talk to them in an age-appropriate way. Younger children need more straightforward explanations; older children need more complex information
- for example, say to a young child, "A donor is someone who gives something to someone who needs it. I helped some parents have babies by giving my eggs/sperm/male/female part to help them start a baby." There are also many books for young children explaining donation
- try to be as relaxed as possible because if you say the right words but look really uncomfortable then that is what the child will take in. Be proud and positive
- reassure your children that there is plenty of love for them and that this does not change your relationship with them
- remind your child that you are dad/mum while you are the offspring's donor/biological parent. You don't have a legal or parental role to your donor offspring.

Excerpts from Talking to children about being a donor*

Stewart, a donor, and his two children.

*"Certainly it's never as bad as it seems to give this information to other members of your family. You know, I think, you couch it in as simple terms as possible, give as much information as you feel comfortable with and let them absorb it and let them if they want to come to you with anything else they will." **Stewart, donor***

"I'm 15 years old and my dad's been a sperm donor for a while. I think I asked him about it because he got a letter about it and I asked him what it was and he explained it to me what it was about. He just said that he was a sperm donor obviously and that he had helped some families."

"I'm 12 years old... Well I wasn't really shocked to find out because it doesn't really concern me. I was a little surprised that I had all these brothers and sisters."

* Visit VARTA's website for complete version.

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Talking to your parents/siblings

Donations can impact on the wider family as they are also genetically connected to your donor offspring. Some extended family support donation and welcome contact with offspring; others may not understand or support this. The same principles concerning how to talk with your partner or children apply to talking with other members of your family. Often, roles may need to be clarified within families.

Sometimes parents and siblings of the donor assume they will have a family role (e.g. grandparent/aunt/uncle role) in the donor-conceived person's life. Whether this happens will depend on the wishes of the person or their parent(s) if they are a child.

VARTA is here to help you

VARTA offers information and advice to donors, partners and other family members. We can talk to individuals, help enable discussions among couples and families about being a donor, and help to clarify the implications for everyone involved.

Contact VARTA

VARTA staff will remain neutral and respectful of people's choices and opinions, **maintaining neutrality and confidentiality at all times.**

For further information:

Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority

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Email: dcrs@varta.org.au

Web: www.varta.org.au

Developed with reference to materials produced by The Sperm Bank of California.