

Searching for donor relationships: The experiences of donor conception offspring, parents and donors

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Abstract

This study looks at the new phenomenon of donor offspring making contact through the internet with their half-siblings. On average participants contacted 5 half-siblings, with a maximum of 55. Contact with half-siblings was generally found to be a positive experience. The findings highlight how donor conception has redefined family relationships.

Background

This study investigates the increasingly widespread phenomenon of individuals conceived by donor ('donor offspring') searching for and making contact with their donors and 'donor siblings' i.e. donor conception offspring who share the same donor and are effectively half-siblings. The experiences of parents and donors searching for and making contact with their donor relations were also investigated.

Method

On-line questionnaires consisting of multiple choice and open-ended questions were completed by donor conception offspring, donor conception parents and donors. The sample consisted of members of the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR); a US-based website which facilitates contact between donor conception offspring and their donor siblings and donors. The survey was on-line for 11 weeks between April and June 2007. Respondents were asked about their motivations for searching and experiences of finding and contacting their donor relations.

Response rate

All members were e-mailed about the survey, of these 6513 had valid e-mail addresses. 1148 (18%) members accessed the survey site, with 931 (81%) of these members completing the questionnaire.

Sample

Offspring: 65 adult offspring took part. They ranged in age from 18-61 years (mean = 28, SD = 11). All were conceived by sperm donation. 54 were female and 11 were male.

Parents: 801 parents completed the survey. 167 were in a heterosexual relationship, 280 were in a same-sex relationship and 311 were single mothers (43 did not respond to this question). The majority (775, 97%) of parents were female.

Donors: 85 sperm donors took part. They ranged in age from 20-72 years (mean = 47, SD = 10).

Results

Donor Siblings

Number of offspring, parents and donors searching

Table 1 shows the number of offspring, parents and donors searching for their donor relations. The majority of offspring are searching for their siblings as well as their donor. The majority of parents are searching for their child's siblings.

	No. (%) searching for/found donor siblings	No. (%) searching for/found donor	No. (%) searching for/found donor siblings and donor	No. (%) not searching
Offspring	7 (11%)	10 (15%)	43 (66%)	5 (8%)
Parents	354 (44%)	36 (4%)	337 (42%)	67 (8%)
	No. (%) searching for/found offspring	No. (%) not searching		
Donor	47 (72%)	16 (25%)		

Table 1. The no. (%) of offspring, parents and donors who are searching for their donor relations

Reasons for searching

Those individuals who are searching for donor relations were asked to state their main reason for doing so by ticking one of a number of multiple choice responses.

Offspring

The most common reason for searching for half siblings, stated by 13 (24.5%) offspring was 'Curiosity (e.g. about similarities in appearance and personality)'. The next main reason stated by 10 (18.9%) offspring was 'to know and understand a 'missing' part of me'.

The most common reason for searching for donors, stated by 11 (22%) offspring, was 'curiosity about characteristics of donor' followed by 'medical reasons' (stated by 8, 16%).

Parents

The most common reason for parents' to be searching for their child's half siblings was 'curiosity (e.g. about similarities in appearance and personality)' (188, 27.2%), followed by 'to give my child a more secure sense of identity' (120, 17.4%).

The most common reason for parents' to be searching for their child's donor was 'for my child to have a better understanding of who they are' (stated by 77, 20.6%) followed by 'to give my child a secure sense of identity' (66, 17.7%).

Donor

The most common reason for donors searching for offspring was 'curiosity about their donor offspring's characteristics' (14, 25.5%) followed by 'wanting to meet my donor children' (11, 21.3%). Many donors were not actively searching, but were instead making themselves available to be contacted by their donor offspring and parents.

Finding and contacting

Table 2 below shows the number of searching offspring, parents and donors who have found and contacted their sibling(s), donor or offspring. Table 3 shows how many they have found. On average offspring have found 5 donor siblings with a maximum of 13. Parents have found an average of 5 of their child's donor offspring with a maximum of 55. Donors have found an average of 4 donor offspring with a maximum of 20.

	No. (%) found siblings	No. (%) contacted siblings	No. (%) found donor	No. (%) contacted donor	No. (%) found offspring	No. (%) contacted offspring
Offspring	7 (14)	7 (14)	4 (8)	4 (8)	-	-
Parents	508 (74)	438 (63)	68 (18)	39 (11)	-	-
Donor	-	-	-	-	22 (47)	22 (47)

Table 2. Number and % of searching offspring, parents and donor who have found and contacted their siblings, donor or offspring

	No. of donor siblings found		
	min	max	mean (SD)
Offspring	1	13	5 (4)
Parents	1	55	5 (5)

	No. of donor offspring found		
	min	max	mean (SD)
Donor	1	20	4 (4)

Table 3. Minimum, maximum and mean number of donor siblings or offspring found by offspring, parents and donor.

Experiences of contacting donor relations

Respondents were asked to rate their overall experience of contacting their donor relations. As Fig. 2 shows, for the majority of offspring and parents, and for all of the donors, contacting their donor relations was a positive experience.

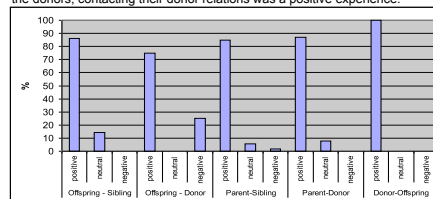


Fig. 2. Offspring, parents and donors experiences of contacting their donor relations

Frequency of contact

Of those offspring, parents or donors who were in contact, information was obtained about the frequency of contact (see Fig. 3). The majority of offspring, parents and donors were contacting their donor relations at least once every 3 months.

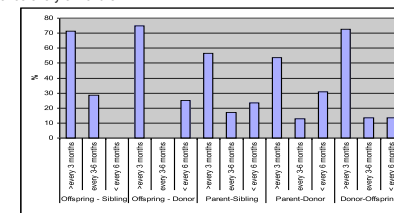


Fig. 3. Frequency of contact between offspring, parents and donors and their donor siblings, donors or offspring

Conclusions

- Individuals are searching for and successfully making contact with their own, or their child's donor relations.
- Offspring's main reason for searching for their half-siblings and donor was out of curiosity. Parents' main reason for searching for their child's half siblings was out of curiosity, and their main reason for searching for their child's donor was for their child 'to have a better understanding of who they are'. Donor's main reason for searching for offspring was out of curiosity.
- Parents had found between 1 and 55 donor siblings for their child. Offspring had found between 1 and 13 donor siblings. Donors had found between 1 and 22 of their offspring.
- The large majority of participants reported that contacting their donor relations had been a positive experience for them. 5 parents and one offspring reported a negative experience.
- The majority of people who had found and contacted their donor relations maintained regular contact with them.
- The study was only carried out with donor conception offspring over the age of 18. A study of 13-18 year olds is currently underway.

Acknowledgements

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