



Marianne, Meredyth, Emily, and Dana are all moms to kids with the same sperm donor.
Courtesy of Meredyth Capasso

Motherhood

Inside the Secret Sisterhood of Women Who Share a Sperm Donor

Tales of sperm banks and donor-related families usually focus on the kids or the donor himself. But what about the mothers?

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Eight years ago Meredyth Capasso, a single mom in New York who'd conceived her daughter using a sperm donor, opened an email from a stranger and found herself staring at the impossible—a picture of a little girl

living in Atlanta who looked exactly like her own daughter. Exactly. The email was from the girl's mother, Emily, who'd located Meredyth through the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR), a website that helps families tied to the same sperm donor find one another. Meredyth knew other families might've used her sperm donor, but this girl could pass for her daughter's twin. Amazed by that image, Meredyth embarked on a journey to locate all her child's donor siblings, forming an "extended family" with three other households—including nine children—across the U.S.

Such newfangled families are springing up all over the country. So why are so many parents still freaked out by the idea? Meredyth talks to Glamour about how such connections have proved rewarding not just for the kids but for her and her fellow moms, who have formed their own kind of modern family.

I shouldn't even be here. That's all I can think after the screams and confusion, as the security guard at my local Tiffany & Co. scoops me up in one arm, my 13-year-old daughter, Gabi, in the other, and shoves us toward the back of the store, yelling, "Run!" My mind struggles to process shouts I hear, like "active shooter" and the mall being "on lockdown." It's terrifying—and absurdly ironic. Because I hate malls. Hate shopping. So why the hell did I choose this random day in October to come to Boca Raton's Town Center Mall to exchange one of Gabi's bat mitzvah gifts?

Gabi and I, along with some 15 others, are hustled down a long, narrow corridor and into a back office. I immediately push Gabi under a desk and plant myself on the floor in front of her. I take a deep breath and call my mother, who's in New York. Then I realize, I should inform my *other* family. So I post an alert about our situation on Facebook. My heart breaks as I gaze at my dear, donor-conceived miracle child. She's petrified.

Suddenly a series of texts comes through from Emily, a fellow donor mom who saw my alert online: “You okay? Keep me posted. Sending love and love and more love.” For a moment I can breathe.

If you’d told me eight years ago I’d be happy to hear from Emily, the mother of one of my daughter’s biological siblings, I’d have said you were crazy. Then again, if you’d told me I’d go on a quest to find the families who used Gabi’s sperm donor, I’d have said you were crazier still. I’d have been wrong on both counts.

Yours, Mine, Ours

When Gabi was born, the very idea of donor-related families frightened me. Not that I scare easily. But the thought of other families using my sperm donor? I blocked it out. I didn’t want my daughter to feel any less mine.

So when I registered with the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR) in 2007, I was hesitant. Gabi was 15 months old and I’d just ended my marriage. It was just the two of us now—if she had more family out there, I figured I owed it to her to find out. I signed up, noting my sperm bank (the California-based Pacific Reproductive Services) and donor number (527). Three and a half years later I heard from Marianne, a single mom from San Francisco who’d used Donor 527 and found me on the DSR. She was a cultured corporate exec raising one donor-conceived child and adopting another. She seemed fabulous. Still, I wasn’t ready to meet. After all, I’m a type-A, neurotic Jewish New Yorker—I had to research the hell out of this subject before diving in. I had questions: At what age would it be best for donor siblings to meet? And how? And was I crazy for even considering it? (The latter question my parents answered with a resounding yes.) I was undeterred. I needed stats, graphs, bar charts.

Several weeks later my world shifted even more when Emily—a teacher from Atlanta with four kids and a female partner—signed on and sent that picture of her eldest. Seeing that image changed everything. She and Gabi were clearly sisters. It seemed unfair to stand in the way of their knowing each other.

Biology connects the children, but fate brought us mothers together.

The traveling began, Gabi and I to their homes, and they to ours. By 2014, when we found Dana—a boisterous, bawdy stay-at-home mother of two from St. Augustine, recently separated from her partner—it was clear we had a clan, of sorts (and a matriarchal one—no dads in the mix). I began pushing for one big “extended family reunion” so we could see all the children at once, and compare notes. I figured the kids would find ways to amuse themselves. I just worried we moms would run out of things to say.

We never stopped talking. Seeing the children’s physical resemblances, and the shared behavioral tics, had us jabbering for days. I felt that electrical tingling just under the skin, like on a really good first date. How long, I wondered, would this feeling last?

The Story You Never Hear

Back in the mall, hours tick by, as SWAT teams maneuver and helicopters swarm overhead. We read crazy tweets on our phones: There’s one shooter—no, two. Throughout the ordeal, Emily checks in, updating me on what’s confirmed, what isn’t. Reading her texts, I’m reminded how much I’ve come to rely on her and the other moms over the years.

That’s the story you never hear about. Most news reports and movies about donor conception focus on—big surprise—the male donor (Vince Vaughn in *Delivery Man*, Mark Ruffalo in *The Kids Are Alright*). Or the kids, and the shock of finding each other (Fox’s new TV dramedy *Almost Family*, MTV’s *Generation Cryo*). Nobody talks about the moms, and our bravery. How we must learn to open up our homes, and hearts, to other mothers—strangers who are also a new kind of family.

It hasn’t been all happy selfies and late-night talks over bottles of wine. We have different parenting styles and didn’t always agree on how much to tell the

kids, or what language to use (brother and sister? donor sibling? special friend?), especially given the varied ages of our brood (two to nine, at our first big reunion). There was a long stretch when I couldn't shake the feeling that Emily, earth mother extraordinaire—seriously, she makes her own almond butter—was kind of passive aggressive and judge-y. When Gabi and I moved from New York to Florida, in part so we could be closer to Emily's and Dana's crews, we saw even less of them than in previous years. What the hell? I felt ignored and unwelcome.

I soon recognized these things for what they were—typical family tiffs, rifts, and misunderstandings. Emily wasn't passive aggressive or judgmental at all—rather, she was the kind of mom I aspired to be but fell short of, and that intimidated the hell out of me. I wanted Gabi to have this family so badly that I'd become overly sensitive to everything. And when it came to the important stuff, we were there for each other. When I faced a series of agonizing spinal surgeries, the moms chipped in to fly Gabi to spend time with her siblings. And soon after our move, when hurricanes Irma and Dorian threatened Florida, we evacuated to Emily's home in Atlanta.

Granted, this choice may not be right for everyone. I know not all donor-related parents bond the way we have. Maybe it's because we're all women—having dads in the mix might've complicated matters. The donor sibs also bear a strong resemblance to one another, which isn't true for all such families. I found it impossible to feel nothing for these kids who look just like mine—I felt a primal tug, and that feeling seems to have extended to their moms too. We were also each firmly committed to giving our children the gift of knowing each other. If they didn't enjoy each other's company—fine. The children could opt out. But at least they'd have a choice.

So far, they've opted in. They're not all best friends, but they seem to enjoy a sense of solidarity. Gabi hears from her siblings regularly. Two of them attended summer camp together. “Do you really have nine brothers and sisters?” one of the other campers asked. “Yeah,” they said, and shrugged.

I have no idea what the future holds. After spending three and a half hours with my daughter on lockdown in a suburban mall, I'm not sure I want to

know. The reports of an “active shooter” turned out to be a false alarm, but I left feeling shaky and yet incredibly blessed. Emily’s texts kept me informed and grounded, and the other moms’ check-ins after I got home helped soothe my frayed nerves.

I’m sure there are plenty of people out there who think we’re crazy to pursue this experiment. I like to believe the stars were aligned when each of us chose Donor 527. Biology connects the children, but fate brought us mothers together. The one thing I know for certain is that I couldn’t have hand-picked a better group to call family.

<https://www.glamour.com/story/the-moms-are-alright>