

## The boy who went looking for his sperm donor dad – and got one heck of a BIG surprise: He had 25 brothers and sisters

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Oli Benjamin knew from an early age that he had come into the world a little differently to most of his friends.

His two mothers conceived him with a sperm donor from California in the late 1990s. They have always been open with him about his beginnings.

But the donor wanted to remain anonymous and that was important to them, too. ‘A donor is someone who makes a donation. It’s not a role,’ says Jody, Oli’s mother.

But as Oli grew up — and like so many children conceived with donor sperm since the procedure became more widely available in the 1980s — he became curious about where he came from. In the UK, fertility treatment is highly regulated. Sperm donation through a fertility clinic is limited to ten families per donor and no money is exchanged beyond expenses. In the U.S., however, the rules are far less strict.



A fascinating new BBC documentary delves into Oli Benjamin's search for his sperm donor father. Pictured: Oli and some of his half-brothers and sisters

When British donor-conceived children turn 18, they have the right to know the identity of their genetic parents. So after his 18th birthday, by now diagnosed with Asperger's and in search of 'deep friendships', Oli started his search. He signed up to the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR), a U.S. database that helps donor-conceived children find each other and their biological parents. A few months later, he discovered not only that his sperm donor father was called Daley Dunham, but that he had changed his mind about being anonymous.

Now, on the eve of a thought-provoking new BBC documentary about Oli's search and the extraordinary consequences of Daley's commercial sperm donation, Oli, his mother, donor father and half-siblings tell their very modern stories . . .

## OLI'S STORY

*Oli Benjamin, 21, from London, works in the events industry. He was diagnosed with Asperger's aged 12. His mother went on to have twins, now aged nine.*

As a child, I often felt like an outsider or weird or not normal enough. I don't see any need to hug, for example. Before the pandemic, I used to bow slightly or not shake people's hands. I was already social-distancing.

So when I decided to go to America, my mother was anxious, but she was still supportive. I was so excited about meeting the donor, I forgot about the possibility that I might not be the only one. So I was shocked when I found out I had 25 half-siblings.

Sperm banks weren't so regulated when my mother went through it in 1998. Often the donor wasn't even asked if they had donated previously.

The siblings had been having reunions with each other and with our donor for ten years before I appeared, and I did worry about fitting in.



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**Oli who lives in London, said his mother was anxious but supportive when he decided to go to America to search for his sperm donor dad. Pictured: Oli with sperm-donor dad Daley**

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It was scary having so many new people come into my life. Occasionally, when people get to the real me, they like me; but more often than not, I end up being rejected.

I was so excited when Sterling [seen in main picture next to Brooklynn], one of my half-siblings, came over to see me in the UK. He positioned himself as the older brother, and I wanted that. I put my trust in him and allowed myself to be emotionally vulnerable, but later we had an argument and it all went wrong.

When I went to the sibling reunion, I wanted it to go well so badly.

We all look alike. People say: 'Oh, your [green] eyes are so similar!' And I'm grateful for my teeth — we all have amazing teeth! But I am more interested in a brain connection.

Mentally, I'm quite different to my siblings. I think that's down to a combination of cultural factors and the way my brain works. I'm much more open than most people about my insecurities and strengths, hence why some people think I'm arrogant.



**Oli (pictured) said the trip to America showed him that your family are those who stick by you, who you grow up with, who care about you, as opposed to biological status**

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So I found the group reunion especially difficult. People tend to behave differently in groups. There's a pecking order and social nuances, and all those things I find not only tough to navigate, but tedious.

I never saw Daley as a father figure, always like a cousin or an uncle. We aren't anything alike personality-wise. But I did get his good teeth. The trip has shown me that your family are those who stick by you, who you grow up with, who care about you, as opposed to biological status.

I have also learned to be more accepting of myself. It's not about getting along with as many people as possible. It's about getting along with the people that are right for you.

And I think I have found a few of those [among the siblings], so I am very happy. As far as I'm concerned, it's a win.

## MOTHER'S STORY

*Jody, 46, a director, lives in Oxfordshire with her partner. She has three children, Oli, 21 and twins, aged nine.*

I was 21 and wanted children desperately. But being gay, you need third-party assistance. I also wanted motherhood to be a shared process, so we agreed my then partner would supply the egg used for IVF which I would incubate.



**Jody, 46, (pictured) who lives in Oxfordshire, said she and her partner went to America because at the time UK clinics wouldn't help**

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At that time, UK clinics wouldn't do this, so we went to America. Some of the clinics would FedEx photos of donors and answers to questions, such as: 'What are your favourite shows?' A lot of people liked Friends.

We wanted someone who was handsome in a cute way, not in a chiselled-jaw way.

Daley had brown hair; we didn't think he would be a popular choice. And he wanted to be anonymous, and that was important to us. Like any straight couple, we wanted the luxury of not having a knock on the door years down the line.

We were always open with Oli that he was donor-conceived: we were two women, after all. I had a massive file of the journey of his conception, which I gave him when he was 18. Whether it's adoption or sperm donation, I feel it's a parent's responsibility to protect a child until the age of 18. Then it's the child's decision whether or not to find their biological parent.

Oli got in touch with the sperm bank and discovered Daley had waived his anonymity. I'm fine about it now, but at the time I was taken aback. I feel a donation is a donation. If you donate to charity, you don't say in a couple of months: 'Can I have it back now?'

I hadn't chosen Daley from a personal perspective. It's not like I met him and said: 'OK, I want you to be in my son's life.' From there, everything snowballed. It went from zero to 100 overnight. It was like, 'Pow!' Initially, I was shocked about the numbers [of siblings] because I thought we were the only ones; you never think someone else will chose the same donor.



**Jody said she knew Oli (pictured) would find meeting his siblings tough, but part of being a parent is letting go**

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But it was super-exciting for Oli. Here was a group of people who had a commonality. He thought that being related, you wouldn't have to explain yourself, that people would get him.

Oli joined a WhatsApp group with most of his family. But the minute I saw the group and how it was female-dominated — there are many more sisters than brothers — I knew Oli, as an outsider from London, was going to find it quite tough. It was Oli's journey, not mine. But I had my heart in my mouth. Flying across the world to meet half-brothers and sisters is daunting. But part of being a parent is letting go. Every mother goes through that, Asperger's or not.

It wasn't easy watching the film and seeing someone you love get hurt. Plonking 26 people down together and saying, 'Get on' is unrealistic. Oli had this perception that they'd all sit down and talk deeply, but it wasn't like that.

I think it has answered questions that would have plagued him because of his curious nature. Now he can decide whether to have one-on-one relationships or just move on with the knowledge of his backstory. Because that's what it is: a backstory.

## SPERM-DONOR DAD'S STORY

*Daley Dunham, 49, works in legislation and finance for the City of San Francisco. He and his wife have three children of their own.*

I was 20 and studying philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1992, when I became a sperm donor. I donated about twice a week for a couple of months. I was paid a small amount, but the main reason I did it was because it was an altruistic thing to do: a bit like giving blood.

I wanted to help LGBT+ families conceive. I initially marked my status as anonymous, but figured I would ultimately change that.

When I met my wife years later, I told her there was this thing that might happen ten or so years down the line. She said: 'If you start getting looked up, we'll just embrace them as family.'



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**Daley Dunham, 49, who works in legislation and finance for the City of San Francisco, explained that he donated sperm twice a week while studying philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1992. Pictured: Oli and some of his half-brothers and sisters**

In the meantime, we had three children of our own.

Still, it took me by surprise when I got a letter in 2012 from the sperm clinic, saying a donor offspring wanted to get in touch. I agreed despite officially being anonymous. After that, I changed my status to 'identity release'.

It felt the right thing to do. That letter led 18-year-old McKenzie (pictured far right in the main photo above) and I to one another. She was the first I met. Over the next seven years, I was in contact with 19 more. My first interaction with Oli was in a WhatsApp group chat with a bunch of his siblings in March 2019. We met a few months later in San Francisco and, overall, I felt it went well. He had a great time with my daughter and two sons, aged 13, ten and seven.

I'm always faced with twin anxieties at that first meeting: are they going to be thinking: 'This guy's not my father, so why's he acting so familiar and friendly? How presumptuous.' Or: 'Why is he so distant, keeping me at arm's length — am I not important?'

I try to treat each meeting with the gravity and empathy it deserves. I do think Oli had unrealistic expectations. But, while he may have felt slighted by a lack of instant connection, my experience meeting him was the same as with each of his siblings.



**Daley revealed he and Oli (pictured) have met in person four times, as he urges other donors to consider making themselves available to their offspring**

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I don't go into these meetings thinking I'm entitled to any relationship; I let the other person take the lead. Oli has since said he felt like 'he couldn't be himself' when his siblings met as a group. I empathise with his feelings of isolation.

Oli and I have now met in person four times. It is natural for parents to fear that contact with a donor will fray parental bonds, become an intruding influence or otherwise replace them. I can assure you that's just not the reality.

To donors considering making themselves available to their offspring, I'd say this is important to many of them and you should do it.

The reason we've all made the decision to be in the public eye is that normalising these kinds of modern family bonds can hopefully help others in their decision-making. One of the things most frequently said at our early get-togethers was: 'The strangest thing about all this is that it just does not feel strange . . . at all.'

### OLI'S HALF-SIBLINGS BROOKLYN AND SPENCER

Brooklynn and Spencer Rydman, two of Oli's half-siblings, did not find out they were conceived with donor sperm donated by Daley until four years ago, when the man they thought was their biological father confessed the secret.



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**Brooklynn (pictured, with her daughter) admits her imagination began to run riot when her father shared having been a sperm donor**

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'Our Dad was feeling guilty about keeping it from us, so he told us and our sister Jordan, who is Spencer's twin,' says 25-year-old Brooklynn, a primary school teacher in Seattle and the mother of a one-year-old daughter. 'You think about how much of what you've always been told is a lie. But it wasn't easy for my parents.'



The young mother says her imagination began to run riot, as her sister started the process of making contact with their biological father. 'I was working in a restaurant and I remember looking at every man close to the right age and wondering if he was the guy,' she recalls.

Her brother Spencer was equally shocked by the news, but says things suddenly made sense. Both of them get on well with their British half-sibling Oli and keep in touch with him.

'Oli has always said he wanted a brother, and he calls me Big Brother, and that's OK,' says Spencer. 'I have brotherly feelings toward Oli, like all my half-brothers and sisters.'

Brooklynn adds: 'There are plenty of siblings who would like to have a relationship with Oli, but they're not sure he wants it and don't reach out.'

*25 Siblings And Me is on Sunday at 9pm, BBC2, and available on BBC Three and iPlayer.*

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-8790943/The-boy-went-looking-sperm-donor-dad.html>