

Half Siblings from Sperm and Egg Donation

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DESCRIPTION

Family can be formed and defined in so many different ways, but biology has always been the most common family bond. If biology didn't matter, we'd give birth to our babies, and then just pick any baby from the hospital nursery to take home. That doesn't happen! In most cases, parents want to take home and raise the child that they have a genetic connection with.

Having a biological connection to a child (to one parent) matters to parents who use sperm and egg donors. So, if parents value this genetic connection on one side of our child's family tree, shouldn't they also recognize and value its importance on the other side? At the Donor Sibling Registry, where we have connected almost 20,000 in 105 countries, all too often we hear parents negate or minimize the importance of their child connecting with their unknown biological parent (the donor) and their half-siblings (people conceived from the same donor). Some refer to the donor's contribution as merely "a piece of genetic material" or just a "donated cell". But to many donor-conceived people, it's so much more.

DONOR OFFSPRING DESIRE TO KNOW ABOUT THEIR GENETIC RELATIVES

Genetic uncertainty has clouded my life since I was 12 years old when I learned that my conception was facilitated by an anonymous sperm donor. Though the shock dissolved in the following months, I'm reminded of this obscurity entwined in my DNA when I'm asked to fill out a medical history form at the doctor's office and have to indicate that, genetically speaking, half of my family tree remains in shadow. I'm joining the Donor Sibling Registry in the hope of connecting with others who have had similar experiences, hearing stories, and maybe even finding a biological half-sibling or relative.

EVEN CHILDREN OF DONORS CAN BE CURIOUS ABOUT THEIR HALF-SIBLINGS.

We often talk about the importance of honesty in donor families and honoring a child's curiosity about their first-degree genetic relatives. Do donors also owe their own children the truth about their donating? Do the donor's children have a right to know that they (may) have half-siblings? DNA testing is already

revealing these family connections, and it will only continue to become more common. My guess is that most donors do not inform their families, as some are ashamed, some don't consider donor children as true "family", some are afraid of 100 kids coming forward, and some have spouses very much against it. I should note that we do have a few thousand donors on the DSR who are open to contact (**with some wonderful resulting stories**), and we do hear about positive donor-offspring connections also made through DNA.

I recently found out that my father donated to sperm banks many times years ago and I wondered if I have any more siblings out there.

WHY NOT GIVE CHILDREN THE OPPORTUNITY TO GROW UP KNOWING THEIR HALF-SIBLINGS?

Our kids are two and half years old. They are only 3 weeks apart in age. They are so alike and they are so different. They spent 4 days together, fighting and playing and then fighting some more. Within our individual families they were only children. In our new family they are very much sister and brother. There aren't words to explain the sense of peace that has given us as parents. There's no yardstick that can measure how much this has enriched our lives.

Some parents who have seen their children's half-siblings posted on the **Donor Sibling Registry** (DSR) have said that they will wait to establish contact with the half-siblings until their child is old enough to make that specific request. Generally, children don't decide when to meet their relatives. (They also don't decide the timing of a lot of things!) We don't wait until they show interest or ask to meet Aunt Shirley, Cousin Frank, or Grandpa Larry to make the introduction. Our children grow up knowing their relatives, and then, when they are older, they choose who they wish to be in contact with.

Just imagine being 20 something and finding siblings on your own when DNA testing is even more wildly popular, or they find you. You then develop some kind of relationship. You find that many of these siblings had parents who encouraged these relationships, even from babyhood. You see the pictures, you hear the stories. Disney, camping, birthdays... A couple of them will be roomies in college, maid of honor in a sibling wedding,

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etc. To me, this would be crushing. I would feel so cheated. Whether or not I had great neighbor pals, awesome cousins, or even siblings from the same home.

We chose early contact with half siblings because we felt if he wanted to end contact when he was old enough to choose, he could. But if we waited until he was older, and told him we knew his half siblings all along, and he wished for that contact, there would be a lot of years and missed opportunities gone. We feel being open, honest, and having connected early on may instill a sense of pride and ward off any shame that may come about if we were secretive about this part of his story and family. We also have a son who was adopted at birth so we are big on celebrating and embracing the ways in which our family came to be.

FOR MOST, CONNECTING WITH HALF-SIBLINGS ON THE DSR HAS BEEN AN OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

I just found my half-sibling this year. I am 29 years old and wish that I could have known him my whole life. It is really special, and I'm so thankful to have found him. We met a couple of months ago and it's like we have known each other all along.

I think it's really cool that I have siblings (I'm close to three sisters and one brother). We get closer every year because we Face Time, text, and get together in the summertime; ever since I was three. My sisters and I are now teaming up against our brother. And it's fun picking on him. We live thousands of miles apart, yet it feels like we all live together. We're talking about going to college in the same town (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Twins (on either end) meet half-siblings for the first time

YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO FIND HALF-SIBLINGS.

When I signed up with the DSR a year ago, I did it more with the hopes of finding information about my donor, than with

any thoughts of actually finding a sibling. After all, I'd be conceived in the late sixties, well before the existence of sperm banks with registered donors. At that time everything was very secretive, with absolutely no information given to the parents. When I got to the DSR, I was the first person to create a listing under my mom's doctor's name, from New York City. About eight months later, a woman emailed me to say that her mother had used the same doctor as mine, just two years later.

We figured we could band together to find out as much info as we could about how the doctor (now long deceased) had gone about finding donors. After a few months of research, we were able to piece together that the pool of donors he used was actually very small. It honestly hadn't occurred to us before that we could be siblings, but once we learned about the small donor pool, we figured why not give it a shot. So we found the most reliable and thorough testing facility and did a half-sibling DNA test. Lo and behold, it came back with 99.7% certainty that we were sisters! So for all the older donor offspring out there who have only fragments of the story of their conception, don't give up hope.

AND FINALLY, OF COURSE, THERE ARE NO GUARANTEES THAT ALL FAMILY CONNECTIONS WILL BE ENTIRELY POSITIVE.

Some people are suspicious when they look at the **success stories** on the DSR, and have asked, "how can these connections all be so positive?" While the great majority of new family connections on the DSR are indeed very positive, some might be flatter or sometimes even more of a struggle. Our families are made up of all races, religions/non-believers, academic backgrounds, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, socio-economic backgrounds, political perspectives, nationalities, and varied personality types.

All families have issues. Not all people are like-minded or have enough in common to wish for a continued relationship, and sometimes people don't agree on the desired level or degree of contact. **When we look around our Thanksgiving table**, do we want to hang out with everyone there? Sometimes not! Some family members are just not the kind of people you'd want to hang out with, and some may just be people with whom we don't have enough in common. Are these reasons to not seek out your (or your child's) unknown genetic relatives? We think not!

People who sell their sperm and eggs are commonly known as "donors", although most don't actually donate anything.