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Children born after donor insemination should be told as soon as possible about their conception

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It is better for children conceived by donor insemination to be told of their origins at an early age, according to the first large-scale study of people who are aware of their donor conception. If the children are not told until they are 18 or older, they are more likely to have feelings of shock and anger, the 24th annual meeting of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology in Barcelona heard today.

The study is one of the first to compare the views of offspring of donor insemination told of their origins during childhood compared with those who only found out in adulthood. The researchers recruited a sample of 165 offspring conceived by sperm donation through the Donor Sibling Registry – a US-based, worldwide website that enables donor offspring to search for their donors and their donor siblings (other donor offspring who share the same donor). The participants answered an online questionnaire consisting of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. They were aged 13-61; 148 (89%) were living in the USA and four (2%) were living in the UK; the majority (approximately three-quarters) were female.

Dr Vasanti Jadva, a research associate at the Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge (UK), found that children born into mother-only or same-sex parent families were much more likely to be told about their origins before the age of three than were children of heterosexual parents: 63%, 56% and 9% respectively. Indeed, 33% of

children in heterosexual families were told about their conception after the age of 18, compared with none in the other two types of families. Two children from heterosexual parents only found out when told by people who were not their parents.

Dr Jadva said: "We asked the offspring how they felt at the time they found out about their conception, excluding those that found out before the age of three as they would have been too young to recall their feelings. For all offspring, the most common feeling was curiosity, irrespective of the age at which they found out. However, there were differences according to the age at which they had been told of their conception, with those told during adulthood more likely to report feeling confused, shocked, upset, relieved, numb and angry."

For instance, 37% of those told when aged 4-11 reported feeling confused, compared to 52% told when aged 12-18, and 69% told when aged over 18. In the respective age groups, 27%, 58% and 75% respectively reported feeling shocked; 16%, 23% and 44% reported feeling upset; 6%, 26% and 38% reported feeling relieved; 6%, 26% and 38% reported feeling numb; and 12%, 13% and 38% reported feeling angry.

Examples of comments made by the participants included:

"I would have appreciated revelation of this information much earlier in my life. Learning of my biological identity at 17 years of age was a traumatic event." A 30-year-old, found out at age 17.

"I am angry because I asked about being 'adopted' several times throughout my childhood and adolescence and told that I was being foolish. I knew." Someone who found out at age 50

"Either tell your kid from the beginning or don't tell them at all, it was

one of the most shocking and upsetting moments of my life. I felt alone." A 19-year-old, found out at age 12.

"I was so young I don't remember feeling much more than interested and curious." A 13-year-old who found out at age four.

Dr Jadva said: "With regards to how offspring felt towards their mother at the time of finding out, offspring told in adolescence or adulthood were more likely to report feeling angry about being lied to and betrayal. Those told as children were more likely to state that it made no difference to how they felt towards their mother compared to those told later in life." According to whether they were told between 4-11, 12-18 or over 18, 12%, 29% and 47% respectively felt angry at being lied to, and 12%, 23% and 34% felt betrayal. There were no statistically significant differences in feelings of offspring towards their father at the time of disclosure.

When asked how they felt currently about their conception, the most common response was curiosity, reported by 69% of offspring. There were significant differences for those feeling angry, relieved and shocked, with those told after the age of 18 more likely to report these feelings. By contrast, a 15-year-old, told before the age of three, commented: "I've grown up knowing how I was conceived. I've always been accepting to it because I never knew any different. Now that I am a little older the only thing that's changed is that I'm a bit more curious."

Dr Jadva concluded: "This study shows that age of disclosure is important in determining donor offspring's feeling about their conception. It appears it is better for children to be told about their donor conception at an early age. This finding is in line with research on adoption, which also shows that children benefit from early disclosure about the circumstances of their birth.

"In light of the trend toward greater openness, it is important we recognise that telling offspring of their conception may evoke a sense of curiosity about their origins which could lead them to seek out their donor relations. In fact, we have found that offspring show high levels of interest in contacting not only their donor, but also their donor siblings. Offspring from this study have gone on to find an average of four donor siblings, with a maximum of 13."

Source: European Society for Human Reproduction and Embryology

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