

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1884, a Philadelphia physician put his female patient to sleep and inseminated her with sperm from a man who was not her husband. The patient became pregnant and bore a child she believed was the couple's biological offspring.

Today, this event occurs every day around the world with the willing consent of women and with the involvement of millions of physicians, technicians, cryoscientists, and accountants. The United States alone has a fertility industry that brings in \$3.3 billion annually. Meanwhile, "fertility tourism" has taken off as a booming global trade. A number of nations bill themselves as destinations for couples who wish to circumvent stricter laws and greater expense in their own countries in order to become pregnant using reproductive technologies. The largest sperm bank in the world, Cryos, is in Denmark and ships three-quarters of its sperm overseas.

In the U.S., an estimated 30,000-60,000 children are born each year through sperm donation, but this number is only an educated guess. Neither the industry nor any other entity in the U.S. is required to report on these vital statistics. Most strikingly, there is almost no reliable evidence, in any nation, about the experience of young adults who were conceived in this way.

This study is the first effort to learn about the identity, kinship, well-being, and social justice experiences of young adults who were conceived through sperm donation. The survey research firm Abt SRBI of New York City fielded our survey through a web-based panel that includes more than a million households across the United States. Through this method we assembled a representative sample of 485 adults between the ages of 18 and 45 years old who said their mother used a sperm donor to conceive them. We also assembled comparison groups of 562 young adults who were adopted as infants and 563 young adults who were raised by their biological parents.

We learned that, on average, young adults conceived through sperm donation are hurting more, are more confused, and feel more isolated from their families. They fare worse than their peers raised by biological parents on important outcomes such as depression, delinquency and substance abuse. Nearly two-thirds agree, "My sperm donor is half of who I am."

Nearly half are disturbed that money was involved in their conception. More than half say that when they see someone who resembles them they wonder if they are related. Almost as many say they have feared being attracted to or having sexual relations with someone to whom they are unknowingly related. Approximately two-thirds affirm the right of donor offspring to know the truth about their origins. And about half of donor offspring have concerns about or serious objections to donor conception itself, even when parents tell their children the truth.

The title of this report, *My Daddy's Name is Donor*, comes from a t-shirt marketed to parents of babies who were donor conceived. The designers of the shirt say it's just meant to be funny. But we wondered how the children feel when they grow up.

This unprecedented, large, comparative, and very nearly representative study of young adults conceived through sperm donation responds to that question. The extraordinary findings reported in the stories, tables and figures that follow will be of concern to any policy maker, health professional, civic leader, parent, would-be parent, and young or grown donor conceived person, anywhere in the world. An extensive list of recommendations is found at the conclusion.

We aim for nothing less than to launch a national and international debate on the ethics, meaning, and practice of donor conception, starting now.

FIFTEEN MAJOR FINDINGS

from My Daddy's Name is Donor: A New Study of Young Adults Conceived Through Sperm Donation

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1. Young adults conceived through sperm donation (or “donor offspring”) experience profound struggles with their origins and identities.

Sixty-five percent of donor offspring agree, “My sperm donor is half of who I am.” Forty-five percent agree, “The circumstances of my conception bother me.” Almost half report that they think about donor conception at least a few times a week or more often.

The role of money in their conception disturbs a substantial number of donor offspring. Forty-five percent agree, “It bothers me that money was exchanged in order to conceive me.” Forty-two percent of donor offspring, compared to 24 percent from adoptive families and 21 percent raised by biological parents, agree, “It is wrong for people to provide their sperm or eggs for a fee to others who wish to have children.”

When they grow up, donor offspring are more likely to agree, “I don’t feel that anyone really understands me,” with 25 percent of them agreeing strongly, compared to 13 percent of the adopted and nine percent of those raised by biological parents.

2. Family relationships for donor offspring are more often characterized by confusion, tension, and loss.

More than half (53 percent) agree, “I have worried that if I try to get more information about or have a relationship with my sperm donor, my mother and/or the father who raised me would feel angry or hurt.” Seventy percent agree, “I find myself wondering what my sperm donor’s family is like,” and 69 percent agree, “I sometimes wonder if my sperm donor’s parents would want to know me.”

Nearly half of donor offspring (48 percent) compared to about a fifth of adopted adults (19 percent) agree, “When I see friends with their biological fathers and mothers, it makes me feel sad.” Similarly, more than half of donor offspring (53 percent, compared to 29 percent of the adopted adults) agree, “It hurts when I hear other people talk about their genealogical background.”

Forty-three percent of donor offspring, compared to 15 percent of adopted persons and six percent of those raised by their biological

parents, agree, “I feel confused about who is a member of my family and who is not.”

Almost half of donor offspring (47 percent) agree, “I worry that my mother might have lied to me about important matters when I was growing up,” compared with 27 percent of the adopted and 18 percent raised by their biological parents. Similarly, 43 percent of donor offspring, compared to 22 percent and 15 percent, respectively, of those raised by adoptive or biological parents, agree, “I worry that my father might have lied to me about important matters when I was growing up.”

When they grow up, well over half (57 percent) of donor offspring agree, “I feel that I can depend on my friends more than my family” – about twice as many as those who grew up with their biological parents.

3. Donor offspring often worry about the implications of interacting with – and possibly forming intimate relationships with – unknown, blood-related family members.

Well over half of donor offspring—58 percent—agree, “When I see someone who resembles me I often wonder if we are related,” compared to 45 percent of adopted adults and 14 percent raised by their biological parents.

Nearly half—46 percent—of donor offspring, but just 17 percent of adopted adults and 6 percent of those raised by their biological parents, agree, “When I’m romantically attracted to someone I have worried that we could be unknowingly related.” Similarly, 43 percent of adult donor offspring, and just 16 percent of adopted adults and 9 percent of those raised by their biological parents, agree, “I have feared having sexual relations unknowingly with someone I am related to.”

4. Donor offspring are more likely to have experienced divorce or multiple family transitions in their families of origin.

The married heterosexual parents of the donor offspring are unusually likely to have divorced, with 27 percent of donor offspring reporting that their parents divorced before the respondent was age 16, compared to 14 percent of those who were adopted and 25 percent of those raised by their biological parents. (The comparison between the parents of donor

offspring and those of the adopted is apt, because in both cases the parents would likely have turned to donor conception or adoption later in their marriages, when marriages on average are more stable.) See Figure 4. (p. 117)

Overall, 44 percent of donor offspring experienced one or more “family transitions” between their birth and age 16, compared to 22 percent of the adopted, and 35 percent of those raised by their biological parents. See Figure 3a. (p. 116)

5. Donor offspring are significantly more likely than those raised by their biological parents to struggle with serious, negative outcomes such as delinquency, substance abuse, and depression, even when controlling for socio-economic and other factors.

Donor offspring and those who were adopted are twice as likely as those raised by biological parents to report problems with the law before age 25.

Donor offspring are about 1.5 times more likely than those raised by their biological parents to report mental health problems, with the adopted being closer to twice as likely as those raised by biological parents to report the same thing.

Donor offspring are more than twice as likely as those raised by biological parents to report substance abuse problems (with the adopted falling between the two groups). See Figure 1. (p. 115)

6. Donor offspring born to heterosexual married couples, single mothers, or lesbian couples share many similarities.

In our survey, 262 of the donor offspring report they were born to heterosexual married couples, 113 to single mothers, and 39 to lesbian couples.

While at first glance the number of those born to lesbian couples might seem rather small, this study is notable for having even 39 respondents who grew up with this experience. Most studies of the offspring of lesbian or gay parents are based on a smaller or similar number of respondents, and they typically lack the comparison groups that our survey offers. However, we must caution that due to the size of the sample of offspring of lesbian

couples, most reported findings related to that particular group can only suggest differences or similarities, although where significant differences emerge they are noted.

All three groups of donor offspring appear fairly similar in a number of their attitudes and experiences. For example, they are all about equally likely to agree that they feel confused about who is a member of their family and who is not, that they fear being attracted to or having sexual relations with someone they are unknowingly related to, that they worry their mother might have lied to them about important matters, and that they have worried about hurting their mother's or others' feelings if they tried to seek out their sperm donor biological father. See Table 2. (p. 109)

Donor offspring
born to single mothers:

7. At the same time, there appear to be notable differences between donor offspring born to heterosexual married couples, single mothers, and lesbian couples.

Overall, donor conceived persons born to single mothers seem to be somewhat more curious about their absent biological father, and seem to be hurting somewhat more, than those born to couples, whether those couples were heterosexual or lesbian.

Donor offspring born to single mothers are more likely than the other two groups to agree, "I find myself wondering what my sperm donor's family is like." Most (78 percent) born to single mothers agree, compared to two-thirds of those born to lesbian couples or married heterosexual parents. With regard to "My sperm donor is half of who I am," 71 percent of those born to single mothers agree, compared to 46 percent born to lesbian couples and 65 percent born to married heterosexual parents.

Regarding family transitions, the single mothers by choice appear to have a higher number of transitions, although if the single mother married or moved in with someone, that would count as at least one transition. Still, with about half (49 percent) of the offspring of single mothers by choice in our sample reporting one or more family transitions between their birth and age 16, it's clear that family change was not uncommon for them. See Figure 3b. (p. 116)

Regarding troubling outcomes, even with controls, the offspring of single mothers who used a sperm donor to conceive are almost 2.5 times as likely as those raised by biological parents to report problems with the law before age 25. Similarly, even with controls, the offspring of single mothers who used a sperm donor to conceive are more than 2.5 times as likely as those raised by biological parents to report struggling with substance abuse. See Figure 2. (p. 115)

Donor offspring
born to lesbian couples:

Meanwhile, compared to those born to single mothers or heterosexual couples, those born to lesbian couples seem overall to be somewhat less curious about their absent biological father, and somewhat less likely to report that they are hurting. However, substantial minorities of those born to lesbian couples still do report distressing experiences and outcomes, for example agreeing that the circumstances of their conception bother them, that it makes them sad to see friends with biological fathers and mothers, and that it bothers them that money was exchanged in their conception. Nearly half (46 percent) of the donor offspring born to lesbian couples in our study agree their sperm donor is half of who they are, and more than half (59 percent) say they sometimes wonder if their sperm donor's family would want to know them. Finally, more than one-third of donor offspring born to lesbian couples in our study agree it is wrong deliberately to conceive a fatherless child. See Table 2. (p. 109)

Regarding family transitions, the donor conceived born to lesbian mothers appear only slightly less likely to have had one or more family transitions before age 16, compared to the donor conceived born to heterosexual married parents. See Figure 3b. (p. 116)

Regarding troubling outcomes, even with controls, the offspring of lesbian couples who used a sperm donor to conceive appear more than twice as likely as those raised by their biological parents to report struggling with substance abuse. See Figure 2. (p. 115)

8. Donor offspring broadly affirm a right to know the truth about their origins.

Depending on which question is asked, approximately two-thirds of grown donor offspring support the right of offspring to have non-identifying information about the sperm donor biological father, to know his identity,

to have the opportunity to form some kind of relationship with him, to know about the existence and number of half-siblings conceived with the same donor, to know the identity of half-siblings conceived with the same donor, and to have the opportunity as children to form some kind of relationship with half-siblings conceived with the same donor.

In recent years Britain, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and some parts of Australia and New Zealand have banned anonymous donation of sperm and eggs. Croatia has recently considered such a law. In Canada, a class-action suit has been launched seeking a similar outcome. This study affirms that a majority of donor offspring support such legal reforms.

9. About half of donor offspring have concerns about or serious objections to donor conception itself, even when parents tell the children the truth about their origins.

Of the donor conceived adults we studied, a sizeable portion – 44 percent – are fairly sanguine about donor conception itself, so long as parents tell their children the truth. But another sizeable portion – 36 percent – still have concerns about donor conception even if parents tell the truth. And a noticeable minority – 11 percent – say that donor conception is hard for the kids even if the parents handle it well. Thus about half of donor offspring – about 47 percent – have concerns about or serious objections to donor conception *itself*, even when parents tell their children the truth.

10. Openness alone does not appear to resolve the complex risks that are associated with being conceived through sperm donation.

In our study, those donor offspring whose parents kept their origins a secret (leaving the donor offspring to find out the truth in an accidental or unplanned way) were substantially more likely to report depression or other mental health issues (51 percent), having struggled with substance abuse (36 percent) or having had problems with the law (29 percent). These differences are very large and striking. See Table 4 (p. 112)

Still, while they fared better than those whose parents tried to keep it a secret, those donor offspring who say their parents were always open

with them about their origins (which are 304 of the donor offspring in our study) still exhibit an elevated risk of negative outcomes. Compared to those raised by their biological parents, the donor offspring whose parents were always open with them are significantly more likely to have struggled with substance abuse issues (18 percent, compared to 11 percent raised by their biological parents) and to report problems with the law (20 percent, compared to 11 percent raised by their biological parents).

11. While a majority of donor offspring support a right to know the truth about their origins, significant majorities also support, at least in the abstract, a strikingly libertarian approach to reproductive technologies in general.

Well over half (61 percent) of donor offspring say they favor the practice of donor conception (compared to 39 percent of adopted adults and 38 percent raised by their biological parents).

The majority of donor offspring – about three-quarters – agree, “I think every person has a right to a child;” “Artificial reproductive technologies are good for children because the children are wanted;” “Our society should encourage people to donate their sperm or eggs to other people who want them;” and “Health insurance plans and government policies should make it easier for people to have babies with donated sperm or eggs.” These numbers are substantially higher than those from adoptive or biological parent families who agree with the same statements. Moreover, in a particularly startling finding, a majority of donor offspring (64 percent) agree, “Reproductive cloning should be offered to people who don’t have any other way to have a baby,” compared to 24 percent who are adopted and 24 percent raised by their biological parents.

12. Adults conceived through sperm donation are far more likely than others to become sperm or egg donors or surrogates themselves.

In another startling finding, a full 20 percent of donor offspring in our study said that, as adults, *they themselves had already donated* their own sperm or eggs or been a surrogate mother. That’s compared to 0 percent

of the adopted adults and just 1 percent of those raised by their biological parents – an extraordinary difference.

13. Those donor offspring who do not support the practice of donor conception are more than three times as likely to say they do not feel they can express their views in public.

We asked donor offspring whether they favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose the practice of donor conception. Of those who favor donor conception, just 14 percent say they do *not* feel they can express their positive views about donor conception in “society at large.” By contrast, of those who oppose it, 46 percent said they do *not* feel they can express these negative views about donor conception in “society at large.”

More than one-third of donor offspring in the study (37 percent), compared to 19 percent of adopted adults and 25 percent raised by their biological parents, agree, “If I had a friend who wanted to use a sperm donor to have a baby, I would encourage her *not* to do it.”

14. Donor conception is not “just like” adoption.

Adoption is a good, vital, and positive institution that finds parents for children who need families. There are some similarities between donor conception and adoption, but our study reveals there are also many differences. And, if anything, the similarities between the struggles that adopted people and donor conceived people might share should prompt caution about intentionally denying children the possibility of growing up with their biological father or mother, as happens in donor conception.

15. Today’s grown donor offspring present a striking portrait of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity.

A full one-fifth – 20 percent – of the donor offspring in our sample said they are Hispanic, compared to just six percent of those from adoptive families and seven percent of those raised by biological parents. The donor offspring are also well represented among races in general. Many of them grew up with Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish religious identities and/or identify with those traditions today. This striking diversity helps to illustrate the complexity of their experience and the reality of their presence in every facet of American life today.