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## **Contacts: Stories from Egg and Sperm Donors**

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# CONTACTS

STORIES FROM EGG AND SPERM DONORS

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CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR IN THIRD PARTY REPRODUCTION  
AND FAMILY TIES

UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC EN OUTAOUAIS

2024

## INTRODUCTION


SINCE THE LATE 19TH CENTURY, THIRD-PARTY REPRODUCTION HAS OFFERED NOVEL SOLUTIONS TO INDIVIDUALS AND COUPLES UNABLE TO CONCEIVE ON THEIR OWN. A NEW ROLE HAS THUS EMERGED TO HELP OTHERS BUILD A FAMILY: THAT OF SPERM AND EGG DONORS. FOR A LONG TIME, THEIR CONTRIBUTION WAS KEPT DISCREET, AS IT WAS THOUGHT BEST TO AVOID ALL CONTACT BETWEEN DONORS AND RECEIVING FAMILIES, ESPECIALLY DONOR-CONCEIVED CHILDREN. THE COMMON VIEW WAS THAT IT WAS IN EVERYONE'S BEST INTEREST TO PROTECT FAMILY LIFE FROM THE INTRUSION OF OUTSIDERS. SINCE THE 1990S, HOWEVER, DONOR ANONYMITY HAS BEEN CALLED INTO QUESTION. AS DONOR-CONCEIVED PEOPLE REACHED ADULTHOOD, THEY BEGAN TO CLAIM THEIR RIGHT TO KNOW ABOUT THEIR ORIGINS, WHICH LED SOME JURISDICTIONS TO OPEN SPECIAL REGISTRIES. MEANWHILE, NEW TECHNOLOGIES, INCLUDING DNA TESTS, DISRUPTED THE STATUS QUO AND MADE ANY PROMISE OF ETERNAL ANONYMITY OBSOLETE. AS SUCH, MORE AND MORE GAMETE DONORS HAVE BEEN CONTACTED BY PEOPLE WHO WERE CONCEIVED THANKS TO THEIR DONATIONS.

BUT WHAT HAPPENS AFTER CONTACT IS MADE? AND ESPECIALLY, WHAT DO THE DONORS THINK ABOUT ALL THIS? WHAT IS THEIR EXPERIENCE OF

## BEING CONTACTED?

THIS GRAPHIC BOOKLET OFFERS A SERIES OF FICTIONAL STORIES DRAWING ON THE CONTACT STUDY, LED BY THE CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR IN THIRD-PARTY REPRODUCTION AND FAMILY TIES BETWEEN 2022 AND 2023 (UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC EN OUTAOUAIS, GATINEAU, QC, CANADA). THE RESEARCH TEAM INTERVIEWED 15 SPERM DONORS AND 12 EGG DONORS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THEIR EXPERIENCE, SEVERAL DECADES AFTER THEY DONATED. THE SPERM DONATIONS WERE DONE BETWEEN THE 1970S AND 1990S IN AUSTRALIA, THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA. THE EGGS WERE DONATED BETWEEN THE 1990S AND 2010S IN THE UNITED STATES. THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS SHARED HOW THEY WERE CONTACTED, THE QUESTIONS THAT IT RAISED FOR THEM, THE WAY THEY RESPONDED TO THE REQUEST, AND, IN SOME CASES, THE RELATIONSHIPS THEY BUILT AS A RESULT.

AS WITH ANY QUALITATIVE STUDY THAT LOOKS AT INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES, THE FEATURED STORIES DO NOT CLAIM TO REPRESENT WHAT ALL GAMETE DONORS EXPERIENCE. STILL, THIS BOOKLET PROVIDES A GLIMPSE OF THE ISSUES REVEALED BY THE CONTACT STUDY, SPOTLIGHTING AN UNDERREPRESENTED VIEWPOINT. EACH STORY IS COMPLEMENTED BY A SHORT TEXT BASED ON THE RESEARCH



FINDINGS. WE WANTED TO SHOW THE HUMAN DIMENSION OF THE GAMETE DONORS' EXPERIENCES, BY TAKING A SENSITIVE APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH DATA. WE INVITE READERS TO SEE THESE STORIES WITH AN OPEN MIND AND AN OPEN HEART.

ANAÏS MARTIN, SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGIST, PHD.

LEAD RESEARCHER ON THE PROJECT "CONTACT: THE EXPERIENCE OF GAMETE DONORS CONTACTED BY THEIR DONOR OFFSPRING" AND POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHER WITH THE CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR IN THIRD-PARTY REPRODUCTION AND FAMILY TIES (UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC EN OUTAOUAIS)



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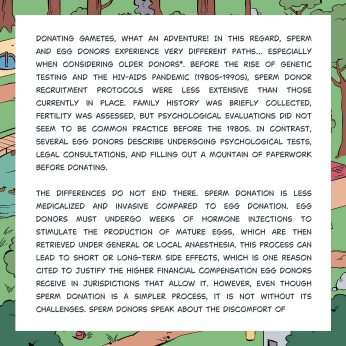
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## DONATING GAMETES, WHAT AN ADVENTURE!









DONATING GAMETES, WHAT AN ADVENTURE! IN THIS REGARD, SPERM AND EGG DONORS EXPERIENCE VERY DIFFERENT PATHS... ESPECIALLY WHEN CONSIDERING OLDER DONORS\*. BEFORE THE RISE OF GENETIC TESTING AND THE HIV-AIDS PANDEMIC (1980S-1990S), SPERM DONOR RECRUITMENT PROTOCOLS WERE LESS EXTENSIVE THAN THOSE CURRENTLY IN PLACE. FAMILY HISTORY WAS BRIEFLY COLLECTED, FERTILITY WAS ASSESSED, BUT PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATIONS DID NOT SEEM TO BE COMMON PRACTICE BEFORE THE 1980S. IN CONTRAST, SEVERAL EGG DONORS DESCRIBE UNDERGOING PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTS, LEGAL CONSULTATIONS, AND FILLING OUT A MOUNTAIN OF PAPERWORK BEFORE DONATING.

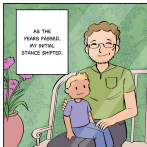
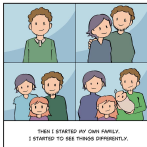
THE DIFFERENCES DO NOT END THERE. SPERM DONATION IS LESS MEDICALIZED AND INVASIVE COMPARED TO EGG DONATION. EGG DONORS MUST UNDERGO WEEKS OF HORMONE INJECTIONS TO STIMULATE THE PRODUCTION OF MATURE EGGS, WHICH ARE THEN RETRIEVED UNDER GENERAL OR LOCAL ANAESTHESIA. THIS PROCESS CAN LEAD TO SHORT OR LONG-TERM SIDE EFFECTS, WHICH IS ONE REASON CITED TO JUSTIFY THE HIGHER FINANCIAL COMPENSATION EGG DONORS RECEIVE IN JURISDICTIONS THAT ALLOW IT. HOWEVER, EVEN THOUGH SPERM DONATION IS A SIMPLER PROCESS, IT IS NOT WITHOUT ITS CHALLENGES. SPERM DONORS SPEAK ABOUT THE DISCOMFORT OF

PRODUCING SAMPLES IN UNFAMILIAR SETTINGS, WITH SOME EVEN SHARING EMBARRASSING ANECDOTES.

\* SPERM DONATION IS AN OLDER TECHNIQUE THAN EGG DONATION: THE FIRST KNOWN BIRTH FROM SPERM DONATION DATES BACK TO 1884 (AS OPPOSED TO 1984 FOR EGG DONATION). PRACTICES HAVE EVOLVED SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY, AND THE DESCRIPTION PROVIDED IN THIS STORY DOES NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE MOST RECENT PROCEDURES.









FOR YEARS, GAMETE DONORS WERE RECRUITED FROM AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS—AT AN AGE WHEN THEY TYPICALLY HAD NO CHILDREN OR STABLE, LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS. SPERM AND EGG DONORS REFLECT ON HOW THEIR PERCEPTION OF GAMETE DONATION HAS EVOLVED THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES, ESPECIALLY REGARDING TO DONOR ANONYMITY. AS THEY BECAME PARENTS, LEARNED MORE ABOUT THEIR FAMILY HISTORY AND HEALTH, OR WITNESSED NEW DEBATES ABOUT DONOR CONCEPTION, THEIR OUTLOOK SOMETIMES CHANGED. SOME NOW FEEL READY TO BE CONTACTED BY PEOPLE CONCEIVED FROM THEIR DONATIONS.



# I WANT TO STAY ANONYMOUS







ALTHOUGH SOME GAMETE DONORS ARE OPEN TO BEING CONTACTED, OTHERS PREFER TO MAINTAIN THEIR ANONYMITY. THIS PREFERENCE OFTEN ARISES FROM LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT MAKE CONTACT DIFFICULT OR UNDESIRABLE, AS WELL AS FROM UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES. IN AN ANONYMOUS SETTING, MANY DONORS ARE UNAWARE OF THE OUTCOMES OF THEIR DONATIONS—WHETHER ANY CHILDREN WERE BORN AND IF SO, HOW MANY. THEY ALSO DO NOT KNOW WHAT THOSE SEEKING CONTACTS EXPECT: IS IT SIMPLY TO GET SOME INFORMATION, OR IS THERE A DESIRE TO BUILD A LONGER-TERM RELATIONSHIP?

DONORS WHO WISH TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS SELDOM PARTICIPATE IN PUBLIC DEBATES, BUT THEIR CHOICE DOES NOT SEEM TO BE SOLELY A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE. KNOWING MORE ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE WOULD PROVIDE VALUABLE INSIGHT.



## FEELING THINGS OUT







MOST SPERM AND EGG DONORS ARE SURPRISED WHEN CONTACTED BY SOMEONE CONCEIVED FROM ONE OF THEIR DONATIONS. SOME BELIEVED IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE. OTHERS SUSPECTED THAT IT MIGHT HAPPEN, BUT DID NOT EXPECT TO BE REACHED AT THIS VERY MOMENT. AT FIRST, SUCH CONTACT CAN RAISE MANY QUESTIONS AND DILEMMAS: DO THEY WANT TO RESPOND? IF SO, WHAT SHOULD THEY SAY? BECAUSE THIS TYPE OF CONTACT IS RELATIVELY NEW, THERE ARE FEW RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO GUIDE DONORS THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE.

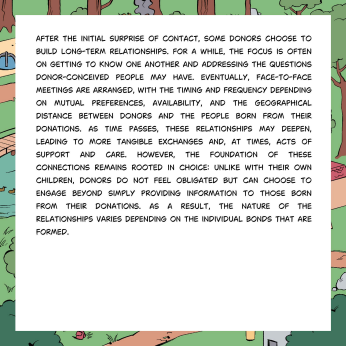


## WEAVING CONNECTIONS



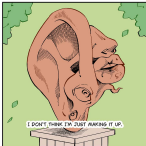






AFTER THE INITIAL SURPRISE OF CONTACT, SOME DONORS CHOOSE TO BUILD LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS. FOR A WHILE, THE FOCUS IS OFTEN ON GETTING TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER AND ADDRESSING THE QUESTIONS DONOR-CONCEIVED PEOPLE MAY HAVE. EVENTUALLY, FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS ARE ARRANGED, WITH THE TIMING AND FREQUENCY DEPENDING ON MUTUAL PREFERENCES, AVAILABILITY, AND THE GEOGRAPHICAL DISTANCE BETWEEN DONORS AND THE PEOPLE BORN FROM THEIR DONATIONS. AS TIME PASSES, THESE RELATIONSHIPS MAY DEEPEN, LEADING TO MORE TANGIBLE EXCHANGES AND, AT TIMES, ACTS OF SUPPORT AND CARE. HOWEVER, THE FOUNDATION OF THESE CONNECTIONS REMAINS ROOTED IN CHOICE: UNLIKE WITH THEIR OWN CHILDREN, DONORS DO NOT FEEL OBLIGATED BUT CAN CHOOSE TO ENGAGE BEYOND SIMPLY PROVIDING INFORMATION TO THOSE BORN FROM THEIR DONATIONS. AS A RESULT, THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIPS VARIES DEPENDING ON THE INDIVIDUAL BONDS THAT ARE FORMED.

LOOKING ALIKE?





THE SAME SENSE OF HUMOUR.



THE ANGLE OF THEIR NOSE  
BRINGS A BIT MORE DISTANCE.



BUT THE TIMBRE OF THEIR VOICE...



THE FEELING THAT I'M SEEING MYSELF,

DISCOVERING MYSELF, A BIT DIFFERENTLY.

THESE ARE THINGS YOU CAN'T MAKE UP.



WHEN DONORS AND DONOR-CONCEIVED PEOPLE MEET, THEY OFTEN SHARE THE SAME CURIOSITY: DO WE LOOK ALIKE? IN THEIR ACCOUNTS, DONORS FREQUENTLY NOTE THE DIFFERENCES AND, ABOVE ALL, THE SIMILARITIES THEY OBSERVE. HOWEVER, DOUBTS MAY ARISE: ARE THOSE SIMILARITIES MERELY A FIGMENT OF THEIR IMAGINATION? THROUGH THEIR UNCERTAINTY, DONORS EXPRESS THE SENSE OF STRANGENESS THAT CAN COME FROM MEETING SOMEONE THEY HELPED CONCEIVE, YET WHO GREW UP OUT OF THEIR SIGHT.



TWO YEARS AGO, I MET BENJAMIN, WHO WAS CONCEIVED FROM ONE OF MY DONATIONS. HE FOUND ME THROUGH A DNA TEST WEBSITE.



I THINK THAT, AT FIRST, IT WASN'T EASY FOR HIS PARENTS TO HEAR THE NEWS. THEY DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY BENJAMIN WANTED TO KNOW ME.



WHEN THEY SAW THAT WE GOT ALONG WELL AND THAT WE WERE BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP, THEY WONDERED WHAT MY INTENTIONS WERE.



IN THE BEGINNING, HIS PARENTS WANTED NOTHING TO DO WITH ME. WE SAW EACH OTHER FOR THE FIRST TIME ONLY RECENTLY, AT A BARBECUE. IT WAS WEIRD, ESPECIALLY WITH HIS DAD.



WE SHOOK HANDS. WE HAD A HARD  
TIME LOOKING EACH OTHER IN THE EYE.



WITH HIS MOTHER, IT WAS EASIER. SHE THANKED  
ME FOR HAVING HELPED THEM TO BECOME PARENTS.  
NOW WE'RE FRIENDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA.



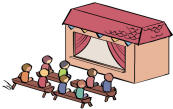
I UNDERSTAND THAT IT'S HARD BECAUSE  
I REMIND THEM OF EVERYTHING THEY  
WENT THROUGH TO CREATE THEIR FAMILY.

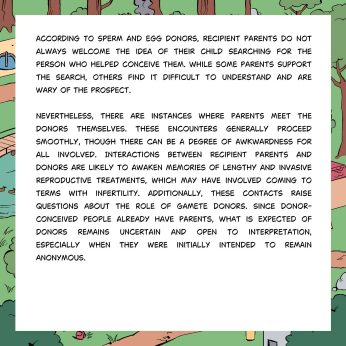


BUT I THINK THERE'S  
ENOUGH ROOM FOR ALL OF US.



THEY DIDN'T START OUT HAVING A PLACE FOR ME...  
SO MAYBE WE CAN INVENT ONE.





ACCORDING TO SPERM AND EGG DONORS, RECIPIENT PARENTS DO NOT ALWAYS WELCOME THE IDEA OF THEIR CHILD SEARCHING FOR THE PERSON WHO HELPED CONCEIVE THEM. WHILE SOME PARENTS SUPPORT THE SEARCH, OTHERS FIND IT DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND AND ARE WARY OF THE PROSPECT.

NEVERTHELESS, THERE ARE INSTANCES WHERE PARENTS MEET THE DONORS THEMSELVES. THESE ENCOUNTERS GENERALLY PROCEED SMOOTHLY, THOUGH THERE CAN BE A DEGREE OF AWKWARDNESS FOR ALL INVOLVED. INTERACTIONS BETWEEN RECIPIENT PARENTS AND DONORS ARE LIKELY TO AWAKEN MEMORIES OF LENGTHY AND INVASIVE REPRODUCTIVE TREATMENTS, WHICH MAY HAVE INVOLVED COMING TO TERMS WITH INFERTILITY. ADDITIONALLY, THESE CONTACTS RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE OF GAMETE DONORS. SINCE DONOR-CONCEIVED PEOPLE ALREADY HAVE PARENTS, WHAT IS EXPECTED OF DONORS REMAINS UNCERTAIN AND OPEN TO INTERPRETATION, ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY WERE INITIALLY INTENDED TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS.



DAVID DIDN'T SAY  
MUCH ABOUT IT.  
I DON'T THINK HE'S  
VERY INTERESTED.  
HE'S FOCUSED  
ON HIS CAREER.



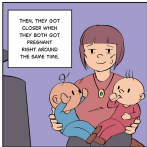
SARAH WANTED TO  
KNOW EVERYTHING.  
SHE EVEN CAME WITH  
ME WHEN I MET ALEX  
FOR THE FIRST TIME.



THEY CONNECTED  
RIGHT AWAY.  
THEY'VE STAYED  
IN TOUCH ON  
SOCIAL MEDIA.



THEN, THEY GOT  
CLOSER WHEN  
THEY BOTH GOT  
PREGNANT  
RIGHT AROUND  
THE SAME TIME.



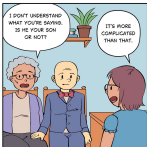
NOW, I BABYSIT THEIR KIDS WHEN ALEX AND SARAH GO OUT TO THE MOVERS!



CONTACTS BETWEEN GAMETE DONORS AND DONOR-CONCEIVED PEOPLE ALSO IMPACT THOSE CLOSE TO THEM. IN THE CASE OF DONORS, THEIR CHILDREN ARE ESPECIALLY CONCERNED. THEY SHOW VARYING DEGREES OF INTEREST IN PEOPLE CONCEIVED THANKS TO THEIR PARENT'S DONATIONS. WHILE SOME ARE INDIFFERENT TO THESE NEW CONNECTIONS, OTHERS FORM LASTING RELATIONSHIPS THAT SOMETIMES INVOLVE MORE FREQUENT CONTACT THAN BETWEEN DONORS AND DONOR-CONCEIVED PEOPLE THEMSELVES.



WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO SAY?





THOSE INVOLVED IN DONOR CONCEPTION FACE CHALLENGES DUE TO THE LACK OF VOCABULARY TO DESCRIBE THE VARIOUS PARTIES INVOLVED. HOW SHOULD DONORS REFER TO INDIVIDUALS WHOM THEY HAVE HELPED CONCEIVE WITHOUT BECOMING THEIR FATHER OR MOTHER, WHOM THEY HAVE NOT SEEN GROW UP AND WHO ALREADY HAVE PARENTS? DONORS RESORT TO INVENTIVE WAYS TO DESCRIBE THE PEOPLE CONCEIVED FROM THEIR DONATIONS... WHICH SOMETIMES FAIL TO BE UNDERSTOOD BY THEIR AUDIENCE.

THE ISSUE OF TERMINOLOGY GOES BEYOND LINGUISTICS. IT RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW TO CONCEPTUALIZE THESE NEW CONNECTIONS. SINCE SUCH CONNECTIONS ARE UNPRECEDENTED AND NO ESTABLISHED MODELS EXIST, DONORS AND DONOR-CONCEIVED PEOPLE MUST NAVIGATE AND SHAPE THE RELATIONSHIPS AS THEIR EXPERIENCE UNFOLDS... AND THEY CANNOT PROVIDE AN ANSWER TO ALL QUESTIONS.



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