

12.1.9.1 DO WE TELL OUR CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR METHOD OF CONCEPTION?

Most parents of a child conceived by Donor Insemination or In Vitro Fertilisation have, at some stage, wondered whether or not to tell their child of his or her means of conception.

It is a complex and sensitive issue and touches on feelings about infertility and the emotional pain associated with it. It is also connected to whether or not you have told others about how your child was conceived.

It can raise many questions for parents: "Why worry the child"? "Won't this just confuse her?" "We want to be open with our child, but how on earth can we begin to talk about this?" "Will he love us less?" "Will she want to know about the donor?" And so on.... Beginnings are important. A couple's decision to have a child with the help of donor insemination is a significant and often difficult decision. However, it is also a decision full of hope, love and excitement about the future. The pregnancy and birth of your child are amazing and wonderful events, especially after having waited so long and gone through so much to become pregnant.

Any child born after a battle with infertility is so precious that parents obviously want to do their best for him or her. Concern about whether or not to "tell" is often about how the truth will affect the child and relationships within the family. This is a very reasonable and understandable concern for any parent in this situation.

About 700 children each year are born in Australia as a result of donor insemination. While the husband of the woman pregnant through donor insemination is legally the father, the responsibility of whether or not the child is told of his origins is separate, and rests with the parents. We know that some parents put the fact of their child's conception out of their minds, effectively making it a non-issue.

We also know that for other parents the issue of whether or not to "tell" does not go away. It may come up quite unexpectedly, such as talking with the child about sex and how babies are made, talking about family likenesses, going to the doctor and being asked to give a genetic history because the child is ill. With more openness in the media about reproductive technologies, it may even happen that the child asks if he was conceived by donor insemination (or in vitro fertilisation or whatever), just as some children ask if they were adopted.

There is also the ethical question: "Do I have a right to keep this information from my child?". One day, of course, the child becomes an adult. Even solely from the medical point of view, it may be important as adults to know their genetic make-up. Because the practice of donor insemination on a large scale is relatively new, there is little research available to parents as they tackle these questions. We do know, however, that experience from work with children shows that significant facts about a child's life are better given earlier

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than later, so the knowledge can be absorbed over a period of time as the child grows.

Research shows that adopted children who are told early of their origins generally fare better than adoptees who are told during adolescence or later in life.

It seems that children can cope with any information as long as it is the truth and there is trust and emotional security in a family, rather than with the uneasy feeling that certain information is being withheld or glossed over. Our understanding of our origins starts very early in life and is made up of what parents and family say and don't say.

"HOW I BEGAN-THE STORY OF DONOR INSEMINATION" was written for parents who choose to tell their child of his or her origins. The purpose of directing the book to fairly young children, possibly even to an age-group unable to fully understand conception, pregnancy and childbirth, is that the idea of how he or she came into the world is introduced early. As the child matures they know then that it's okay to ask Mum or Dad to elaborate on the story of their conception. The aim of telling early and lovingly is so your child can feel good about his or her beginnings.

Just as many parents use sex education books of the "where-did-I-come-from?" variety, so too can "HOW I BEGAN - THE STORY OF DONOR INSEMINATION" be used. You can read it with your child or use it as a resource book for yourself as you grow comfortable with some of the concepts and words. It is written for children in the 4-8 year age group, although both younger and older children will find it of interest and relevant.

We hope you will use it to find the approach that best suits you and your child.