

HOW TO TALK WITH KIDS ABOUT THEIR UNIQUE CONCEPTION

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The single biggest concern of individuals pursuing parenthood through donor conception, surrogacy, or adoption continues to be that of the impact on the children. Parents want to know how and when to talk to their children about their genetic origins.

The best interests of children and their families are served by children growing up with the knowledge that they are not genetically or gestationally related to one of their parents. Some reasons for this include:

- Secrets in families are damaging
- Adoption has taught us a great deal about how children feel in families where there are genetic secrets
- Children often “sense” there is a secret; sense there is “something wrong”
- Children who “sense” there is something wrong in their family usually assume it is about them and assume the worst
- Secrets almost never stay secrets forever
- When secret information finally comes out, the feeling of betrayal can be overwhelming
- Feelings of betrayal in families often lead to issues of trust

The first step in addressing the disclosure issue is for parents to examine their own feelings about the donor conception. Did the couple agree on the path to take to parenthood? Did they grieve the loss of the child they thought they were going to parent? Parents can get a feel for their comfort level about how their children came into their lives by asking themselves how it feels to imagine talking to their kids about it. These conversations involve the acknowledgment that there is another “family” in the world that is connected to their child in a unique way; but mom and dad are connected to the child in a way that no one else ever will be. Some feelings of being threatened by this are normal, particularly before infertility is resolved and before parents are comfortable with using a donor. As the infertile partner comes to terms with their own infertility and grieves the loss of the genetic child they will not have, they will feel more empowered, indeed entitled, to be the parent of a child whose “blood” they do not share.

HOW YOUNG CHILDREN THINK

Children are naturally curious about everything. A child of average intellect will want to ask questions about anything that comes into her head. "Where did the first tree

come from?" "Where does the sun go when it's nighttime?" The degree to which those questions will be raised will depend on the responses he gets from parents and the atmosphere created by parents to encourage children's inquiries. Most parents would think their children so smart to wonder aloud about how high is up. But should the question arise about their birth story, or why they do not look like daddy or sister, a parent's discomfort may quickly inform the child that it is not a subject open for discussion. To the child there may be no difference between asking questions about their natural environment and how they came into the world. As parents' feelings about infertility and reproductive technology come into play, parent's reactions may quickly tell the child that some questions are okay and some are not. The inference they draw from the message not to ask those questions could be damaging to the way in which the child perceives their entrance into the life of mom and dad.

WHEN AND HOW TO TALK WITH KIDS

To understand how to talk to children about conception, we might first look at how children think. While they often sound like miniature adults, they think differently from adults. Our best efforts at explanations may be thwarted by the limitations of their developmental stage. Anne Bernstein, in *Flight of the Stork*, gives two examples of how children understand where babies come from:

Three-year-old Alan: "If Daddy put his egg in you, then I must be a chicken."
Susan, age three: "To get a baby, go to the store and buy a duck."¹

Parents can begin talking to children about their conceptions the minute the child enters their lives or before. This may be during a pregnancy, at birth, or in the case of adoption, sometime after birth. It is not conception parents need to communicate about as much as the unique path by which that child has entered the parents' life. Thus, the intent is for parents to begin to practice talking about the presence of the other people in that child's life to whom they may be genetically related. Parents may want to tell their children how glad they are that the "helper" gave what was needed so this child could be in their life. Children may be told they have the "Sally's hands, the surrogate's beautiful green eyes, or their birthmother's toes. They may say how grateful the parents are to the doctor (and helper, surrogate, birthmother, etc.) who made it all possible and how precious the children are to mom and dad.

Books can be an extremely useful tool for introducing the subject of conception and birth, especially books written specifically about adoption or how babies are born. There are also many children's books in which the subtler theme is adoption or blended families or the way babies become part of families.

When parents reflect on the feelings that arise after talking with kids about conception or after reading certain books, they gain insight into the feelings they have about their path to parenthood. Does the language seem too awkward? Do they feel

¹ Bernstein, Anne; *Flight of the Stork*; Perspectives Press, 1994

threatened by mentioning the third party involved in the child's conception? The pre-verbal months provide a perfect opportunity to practice ways to talk to their kids about their conceptions. Children will pick up on the non-verbal, the touch, the affect, or the giggle. One new mom by adoption shared with me that while feeding her infant daughter one morning, she asked her: "So, how do you like being adopted so far?" She was practicing, normalizing language not used in daily parlance, playing with words she knew were awkward, but taking advantage of her daughter's infancy to work her way into the kind of casual conversation about adoption (gamete donation, etc.) that would eventually be repartee in their home.

WHAT TO SAY

Parents should always speak the truth, but not necessarily the whole truth every time. They should use accurate, positive language. Babies are made from sperm and ova, not seeds and eggs. Babies grow in a uterus, not a tummy or a stomach or a belly. Couples are infertile for many reasons, not because mommy's tummy was broken and the doctor couldn't fix it. Eggs are something you scramble for breakfast in the morning. A stomach is someplace food goes. A funny story illustrates the importance of differentiating body parts. A pregnant woman was having dinner one night with her three-year-old son. The son had tears streaming down his face. "Honey, what's the matter?" she asked him with concern. Through his tears he replied: "I feel so sorry for that poor little baby in there with all that food plopping on its head." Despite my belief in the value of using accurate language, my own son, conceived through ovum donation, recently told me that the story he best understood were those his dad used in a car analogy to explain his conception: people are like cars. They need all their parts to run. We were missing a part needed to make a baby.

Whether through adoption, surrogacy, gestational carrier, or gamete donation, children should ideally start hearing the words related to their conceptions and births by the time they are three years old. The reason for telling a child about how they joined your family is not because they need to know the technical details of how in vitro fertilization or inseminations were actually performed; it is because children need to begin the process of acknowledging that there is another person or people in the world to whom they are connected in a significant and lasting way. It is normal for children to fantasize about the pieces of the puzzle that may not be filled in for many years; this is not sufficient reason to delay talking to them even though they may not yet fully understand. To tell a child of age nine or ten, essentially pre-adolescence, that they are not related to or connected to their mother or father in the way that their friends or other family members are related to their parents would be a tremendous shock, indeed perhaps perceived as a betrayal. Speaking about third party reproduction casually, early, and often normalizes it. It makes the information simply a part of the family story.

Children hear words all the time they do not completely understand. They want to know how they can hear grandma's voice on the other end of the telephone. We can explain to them what we understand about sound being carried through wires. They can hear sound and see wires but that is as abstract a concept as a microscopic sperm and

ovum meeting, growing inside a place we cannot see and ending up being the baby they once were. My son was told there was a part of my body that did not work. Eventually part of the telling became the labeling. The part of my body that did not work was called my ovaries. My ovaries did not make the thing I needed to make a baby. That thing I needed is called an ovum; another woman gave me her ovum so that he could grow inside me and be my son.

Children need an environment in which they can feel safe to blurt out their questions and thoughts. This can provide parents the opportunities to clarify misconceptions, build upon prior knowledge and gradually increase understanding. This will happen when parents bring children into their lives with pride, not shame, and resolution, not unhealed wounds. In an open, sharing atmosphere, this weighty subject need not be a burden to children but part of the multi-faceted journey of childhood and parenting. Sometimes the children will follow our lead. Sometimes the children are our guides. When we listen to the questions they ask, the path becomes clearer.

Carole LieberWilkins is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in Los Angeles, CA, specializing in reproductive medicine and family building options. She is a founding member of Resolve of Greater Los Angeles, having served on the Board of Directors for 14 years. Carole has lectured widely to professional and non-professional audiences on a variety of infertility subjects, but is perhaps best recognized for her work in talking to kids about unique conceptions. She is the mother of two sons, one through adoption and one through ovum donation. They are her consultants and advisors and claim they are the true experts in this subject.