



Donor Conception Network



Planning a family using donor insemination: a letter from Walter to would-be DI Dads

Dear Would-be DI Dad

Like you I imagine, I never expected to be here. Unless you've had some disease or complication as a boy as a result of which you've always known you wouldn't be able to have children of your own, or you've had a vasectomy, you don't expect it. And it's a body blow when they tell you you're infertile. For the rest of my life I'll remember the day when they told me in that matter-of-fact way doctors have. I've now got two children conceived through DI, born in 1983 and 1986, but I can remember something of the feelings that hit me then.

Angry times

We just assumed that fatherhood could be ours if and when we wanted it – indeed the opposite problem was more important - the danger of becoming a father too soon. It was something we've all probably wasted lots of worry, money and effort on. Looking back one has to smile!

What have we done to deserve this, I thought. They can't even give us a sensible explanation for most male infertility. It's so unfair – all our friends just seem to be having children without any trouble. They didn't have to go off to special clinics, being told to be sure to have sex at particular times, wear loose pants, demean themselves by having to produce sperm samples. They seem to have ordinary sex lives, and pregnancies just happen for them.

It's cruel. So cruel you may not even want to talk to anyone about how bad you feel. Because it's the last thing you want to tell anyone, and anyway they couldn't possibly understand. How could you talk about this anyway? Anyone you might think of talking to about it might just burst out laughing or launch into some pseudo-science they've read in the papers or seen on TV. They'd just make it worse.

An infertile man. Sterile. A jaffa – no pips. Not impotent, ok, but still “shooting blanks”. You've heard plenty of jokes about all this, now they will be laughing at you. It's almost unimaginable that you could ever stand tall as a man again if your friends knew about this. She says she doesn't think any the less of you, but how can you tell what women really think?

Now the options for you as a couple are pretty limited. Remain childless, try fostering, adopting, or donor insemination. That is on the assumption you really are a

couple. “If I can't produce the goods,” you may wonder, “does she really want to be with me?” They say that females choose their mates from men they want to father their children. Now it's obvious I can't even do that, would she really want to stay with

me? She wants kids, wants them desperately. I want us to have a family too, but that much? She says she's even prepared to have DI. Probably that's just because she's so desperate, not because she really understands what it would be really like for us.

Some people know we're having some “treatment” and she says that to save my feelings she's happy to say it's her problem, not mine. How low can I get - where she has to cover up for me? Perhaps the fairest thing would be for me to leave now so she can find a man who is fertile with whom she can have children the ordinary way.

Now I really don't like this idea of donor insemination. Some other guy's sperm in my woman. Is this what I'm reduced to? A bystander, while she has to undergo “treatment” that's all my fault. Who are these donors anyway? No, actually I don't want to think about them as people, as men – that would just make me feel jealous and even more angry.

So if we went ahead?

Assuming we had a child by DI, what then? What would I feel? Wouldn't I be reminded every minute that this child wasn't mine? Surely fathers bond with their children because they are genetically their children. Wouldn't I just look at this baby and think "donor, you lucky sod whoever you are", and just feel turned off at the very moment that I should feel really great? As the child grows up, aren't I always going to feel a certain distance?

After all, feelings about inheritance are born and bred in us. We inherit our fathers' names because we inherit our fathers' blood. The simplest family tree tracks the blood line. We inherit property as well as characteristics from our ancestors. Kith and kin belong to each other. Can you really create this artificially? There's going to be something missing, and it's going to be my genes that have gone missing. I'm going to be the end of the line. I might find myself going along with the idea of a DI baby and suppressing these feelings for her sake, but could I really love the child as mine?

First thing that's going to happen – the family and friends come around to coo over the newborn and start saying "Lovely baby. Doesn't look much like you, though. Hey, it's probably the milkman's!" they'll joke. What the hell do I say then?

And as this child grows up? It might be ok in toddler times, but what about the teenage rebellion years? "You're not my real Dad anyway" will be the dart hurled at me as they slam the door, justifying their claim to ignore my attempt to enforce some household rule. My authority as parent would be shot to pieces, and I would be wounded below the belt.

Positive times

Well, friend... all I can say is that I have been there, shared some of these feelings, and I have talked to hundreds of other men who've been there. I've read lots about genetics, all the donor conception research there is, and talked to hundreds of families with donor conceived children. And, after all these years, none of it works out as bad as these fears might suggest. In fact my message is that surprisingly you can turn these negative feelings around.

First it may surprise you to know that around one couple in seven experiences some fertility problem or other, and many of these are related to what the clinics call a "male factor". So the chances are a workmate, friend, or family

member you know is having or has had the same problems to address. Like as not, they've probably buttoned it up which is why you don't know about it.

Loss of fertility can feel like a bereavement, and the emotions surrounding it and the time it takes to put it in perspective are similar. Logically you know it's nothing to be ashamed about, but emotionally it's quite different. Of course some of the feelings of grief and of sadness don't go away fast, but we learn to live with mixed feelings – the feelings of loss for the children we could never have mixed with the feelings of excitement and joy for the children we do have.

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Yes it's a bit strange supporting your partner through insemination treatment. Neither of you has been there before – so at least you can hold each other through the process, and acknowledge the fears and worries the other has. The clinic has told you about the safeguards they take on donor selection and screening. But of course you worry about the possibility of errors. Wasn't there some horror story in the paper a while back about a mix-up with sperm samples? Actually this happened in the USA over 20 years ago. Things are well regulated here (unlike the US) and I've never heard of a mistake like that in the UK, but you wouldn't be human if you didn't think about the possibility.

Next, all that stuff about bonding and genetics is complete rubbish. Genes don't tell us who to love. For some genetic parents learning to love the baby takes a while for one or other of them. DI parents are no different. But seeing your partner through treatment; then if you're lucky, into pregnancy; together through ante-natal classes and at the birth, the vast majority of us DI dads find bonding with the baby we've seen on the scans, and felt moving inside our partner, the most natural of occurrences. After all the children that are born to us are born as a result of a positive decision to have children this way. The reality is that if we had not taken this decision the children would not have been born. Our children are as wanted as any child.

But you do have to be ready to cope – almost immediately – with the comments about family resemblance. From the midwife who seconds after delivery looking at a man and then at the baby exclaimed "Where did this one come from then?", to family, friends, acquaintances and even complete

strangers in supermarket queues. Of course it's a lot easier if they already know that there's no reason for the baby to look like you physically. Otherwise your choices are to brush the remarks off with a response like "Some people think the baby looks more like his/her Mum", or to take the opportunity to tell people the facts.

You may think that you couldn't tell people about infertility and DI and you wonder how they'd respond if you did. Of course it does depend on who they are and how well you know them. All I can say is that the almost universal experience of the men and families I've spoken to (over 500) is that when they've told other people the response has been positive. Why?

First, people can feel really privileged to be told something that is obviously private news. You've trusted them with this special information. Second, they begin to see you in another light. They realise that you must have been through a stressful time and that deciding on DI takes courage and determination. They express admiration and respect for what you and your partner have done. Of course I can't promise that's the reaction you'll get. It'll depend on the people you tell. Some people are really interested. Some are a bit stunned, not knowing quite how to react. But you (or the people you tell) will be unlucky if anyone laughs or jeers at you. That's just not what happens.

Of course you can never be sure what people are saying or thinking behind your back. But ultimately you do what's right for you and your partner, you and your future family, and not for the kind of people who are going to spend their time gossiping.

And the children?

Nor do your children think the less of you for not being genetically related to them. You are Dad. You are there, bringing them up, day in day out. You are fathering and parenting as much as any other father. Or possibly more so, because you and your partner have had to think much more than other parents about why you want children.

You probably wouldn't want to live through those agonising times of doubt and worry again. But if you survive them with your relationship intact, a) your relationship with your partner is stronger and b) your attitude to being a parent is more mature than those who have just slipped into parenthood.

Young children when told the facts about their origins don't find the information shocking. They don't really understand the implications. But telling them young does mean that as they grow older and you build on what they've been told, the news is never a shock, and by the time they are teenagers they won't be able to remember when they first learned the information.

And the "You're not my Dad" taunt? It hasn't happened in my family, nor in that of any other DI family I know. Why not? Well, it's difficult to know completely but probably because my teenagers know that it's not likely to press any shame or hurt buttons in me. It doesn't mean we don't have angry times - we do, just like any other family, but we have a very open and honest relationship and the kids love and respect me as the father who has been there for them since day one.

We all know I'm not genetically related to them, but I'm not ashamed of my infertility and they know it. They absolutely accept me as father partly because they clearly haven't got another one, and partly because I have all the responsibilities and authority that go with the role of being their father.

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What does the scientific research say about how people conceived through DI fare? Not a lot, and the reason is fairly obvious. Through most of the years DI has been practised - basically since the 1940's onwards - it was shrouded in secrecy, and most of the people conceived have never been told. So it's impossible to know how they've fared.

Some very powerful evidence has recently emerged as to how some of those feel who have learned the truth about their origins later in life after it had been kept a secret. They felt angry, misled and betrayed. Being open with children about their origins has been a relatively recent trend and there aren't sufficient children old enough to research.

But so far the news is good. The teenagers I know in the Network have good relationships with their Dads (and

Mums too!), and are pleased to know about their DI origins, but they don't think it is the most important information about them. They have more interesting things going on in their lives.

There hasn't been any research that proves whether it's best to tell children, and frankly it would be impossible to conduct such research. By definition you can't ask people how they feel about not being told something if they haven't been told it. We do however, know from research what it is that children and young people need as a foundation for doing well in life.

The most important factor is to grow up in a climate of stability, security and love where they can trust the adults who care for them to be honest in their relationships with them. This can be equally well provided by non-genetically related parents and carers as by those who have a full genetic relationship.

Secrets have a tendency to be sensed by others and children are very quick to pick up atmospheres and glances. Our belief is that to bring up children misleading them about an important piece of information relevant to them as individuals is hardly a secure foundation for a loving family relationship. Telling them sooner rather than later is the right thing to do.

The next steps?

So ... if you're contemplating having a family with donor assistance – and don't get pushed into it, it's not right for everyone - here's my advice:

- Take your time to be sure this is what you want to do; don't rush into it. There are lots of issues to face: about treatment, cost, timing, choice of donor, let alone the emotional stuff.
- Talking to other people about it is the best way of finding out how you do feel. There comes a point in talking to your partner about doubts or concerns where you just go round in circles. Challenge the myth of counselling being only for wimps – take all opportunities offered.
- Join a self-help group. Donor Conception Network is the national organisation made for you where you can talk to other people who have children, are undergoing treatment, or are contemplating it. You may also get help from a local clinic support group.
- Bringing another person into the world, parenting them to independent adulthood, and thus contributing your values to the next generation, is one of the most responsible acts any human being can perform. Be proud of what you plan to do. It's a positive experience that can enrich your life. It certainly has mine.

With very best wishes
Walter

Further support and information

The Donor Conception Network was started in 1993 by a group of families who had all chosen to be open with their children about their origins. We wanted to help break the isolation felt by so many people using donor assisted conception methods, and to share our experiences of talking to our children, and to family and friends, about DI and more recently egg donation. We have two national meetings a year, one in London and one in the North of England, produce a Newsletter twice yearly, have a library of books, videos, audio tapes and articles that can be borrowed and, most importantly, we put people in touch with each other.

Network Membership

You can join the network as an individual or a couple. Annual subscriptions are £15 (£5 unwaged). To join download a membership form from the website or simply send a cheque to our PO Box below.

The Donor Conception Network is a registered charity, registration number 1041297

Useful addresses

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0207 377 5077
Website: www.hfea.gov.uk

British Infertility Counselling Association

69 Division Street
Sheffield
S1 4GE
Information line: 01342 843880
Website: www.bica.net

Letters in the Planning a Family Series

A letter from Walter to would-be DI Dads
A letter from Olivia to would-be DI Mums
A letter from Olivia to would-be DI Parents about "telling"
A letter from Emily to single would-be mums
A letter from Rachel to would-be egg donation parents

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