

WHO AM I?

(P 245-255, *Mommies, Daddies, Donors, Surrogates: Answering Tough Questions and Building Strong Families*
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As we grow up, we all have to balance our sense of belonging with our discovery of our own unique individuality. According to Erik Erikson's eight stages of development, a good deal of adolescence is devoted to one side of that equation – finding your own identity. Of course, you've already been working on this well before you hit puberty, but nothing like you'll experience it in adolescence. If you fail to find your identity, you're left with a sense of confusion. A child born with a donor or surrogate has some unique challenges in completing Erikson's fourth stage of development, Identity versus Confusion. In Western culture, it's presumed that children will have a better sense of their identity and higher self-esteem if they know their genetic roots. Denied that information – physical, medical, social, psychological, and even educational – they will suffer from genealogical bewilderment. This would apply to both adopted children and birth-other children who don't know who their progenitors are. According to the experts, that genetic void leaves children baffled and bewildered and is not in their best interests.³⁹

But you know, when I tried to find studies scientifically documenting this relationship between genealogical bewilderment and weakened self-identity, I found none. So I want to go on record as saying it is our current assumption, rather than our current knowledge, that leads experts to conclude that children will leave adolescence with identity confusion if we deny them full access to their genetic histories. Instead, I would just say that both adopted children and children conceived with a birth-other may have a different journey as they sort out the question "Who am I?"

The Hole Inside versus the Missing Puzzle Piece

Some of the children tell us it feels like a "hole inside" as they try to put together a whole picture of themselves. I'm remembering Nadine, an eighteen year-old adopted young woman who told me she was desperate to find her birth mother and her birth mother's family. Tall, blond, and blue-eyed, she had nothing in common with either of her parents, who were short and dark. Every time she walked into a family party, she looked into a sea of people who looked nothing like her. For once, she wanted to walk into a room and find herself mirrored by people who looked, talked, or acted like her. Christine Whipp is now forty-six years old. She only found out when she was forty that she was the product of donor insemination. She always assumed her father's family was her gene pool, but now she's all shaken up: "I don't even know who I am anymore. . . . DI [donor insemination] robbed me of half my genetic history, and it robbed my children and grandchildren, too."⁴⁰

Now let's look at the exact opposite challenge – instead of a missing piece, too many pieces of the puzzle. That's what can happen when your children do know their donors or surrogates and have to piece all that together to sort out "Who am I?" Where are you supposed to put this extra "parent" if you already have two? And what do you

³⁹ According to Susan L. Cooper and Ellen S. Glazer, "children who have no knowledge of their genetic history must live with a sense of bafflement about how they came to be and bewilderment about who they are. Our current understanding about human nature and the psychological development of human beings indicates that a genetic void is not in the best psychological interest of a person" (p 351, *Beyond Infertility: The New Paths to Parenthood*. 1994)

⁴⁰ "My Daddy was a Donor" (*Observer*, January 20, 2002)

do with the extra piece when you also have a missing piece? I have two mommies, but I don't have a daddy – so what does that make the donor? I have two daddies, but no mommy – so what does that make my surrogate?

Our Families Are Our Mirrors

Our identity is never formed in isolation. We figure out who we are in our relationships with our most intimate others. It's not just how we interact with them; it's also how we think about them, how we feel about them, and how they think about us. Key players in this drama are our mothers and fathers. Identity formation is a challenging task for any child. Now imagine the complications when we include in the relationship list (1) a mom who is a child's social and biological parent but not her genetic parent; (2) an aunt who is the child's progenitor, the egg donor who gave her eggs so her sister could have a baby; (3) the child's dad, her genetic parent, who mixed his genes with his sister-in-law's in a dish so he and her mom could have their child. Could we say this might be a fairly daunting identity task for the daughter?

At a very early age, toddlers discover that the little person they see in the mirror is not someone who will come out and play with them but someone who is them. This is a great revelation and stimulates hours of exploration and study. In adolescence, children rediscover the mirror. They'll stare into it for hours and hours, looking for both perfection and flaws, but, more important, trying to get a reading of just who they are.

In a more figurative sense, children count on other people to mirror a sense of themselves. Many children who have an anonymous donor lament that they are missing one key person who could be that mirror. We all know the stories about identical twins separated at birth who are reunited in adulthood only to find that they have pursued the exact same career or use the identical toothpaste and cologne or crave the same food or play the same sports or have the same quirky habit of turning around twice before they get into bed at night. By reuniting, they have finally found that mirror, discovering something about themselves as they see it reflected in their genetic double. To complete their identity formation, birth-other children may long for just such a mirror in the image of their genetic donor.

When we live with our mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, we take such mirroring moments for granted, like the air we breathe. We often don't even think about them, and when we do, it is to figure out self-consciously how we're alike and how we're different from the people we're related to. But if you don't have access to all those people, you have to stretch to imagine what you got from or share with the people you are related to – both by blood and by bonds – that makes you who you are.

Nicky is a young woman who feels she has to compensate for the loss of half her identity by holding on to the hope that someday she will find out who her sperm donor was. In the meantime, she pays scrupulous attention to her only access to blood ties, her mother's side of the family, "always searching for similar personality traits and interests in an attempt to affirm who I am and why I am what I am."⁴¹ She doesn't feel so great about her own sense of identity. She worries that when her mother dies she will have lost her only immediate biological link and feel very alone and solitary. Nicky imagines that her identity conundrums might even be passed down to her own children someday because they'll never be able to know a quarter of their biological heritage. She's not longing to find her sperm donor so she can discover her missing father or complete her family. All she wants to do is find the additional mirror that will reflect to her a sense of who she is

⁴¹ Nicky, "To Whom It May Concern" p.30 in *Let the Offspring Speak: Discussions on Donor Conception*. New South Wales, Australia: The Donor Conception Support Group of Australia (1997)

The Family Romance That Helps Shape Identity

This identity search, so fervent in the teenage years, can actually be traced back to the family romance that children often engage in during grade school. Unlike the family reverie, the family romance is a child's solo affair. Your children engage in these fantasies so they can imagine new possibilities for themselves – envisioning their own talents and capabilities separate from their family connections. Not having even reached puberty, they're still too young to go off on their own. Instead, they transport themselves to other fantasized parents far away from home. Typically, children fabricate madeup people to be those imaginary parents. These family romances are often quite grandiose in their storyline, as children elevate themselves to the status of the child of some king or queen.

A child born with a birth other has a bit of a complication in the family romance. Why? Because there's some reality to the fantasized parent. We have found that adopted children can conjure up unknown birth parents as the key players in the family romance.⁴² Now we're beginning to see the same thing among children with donors or surrogates. The wonderful birth other who gave the gift of life or half the child's genetic make-up might someday show up on the scene to claim his or her long-lost child. The nice people who so generously give mommies and daddies their eggs, their sperm, or their wombs can easily be transformed into the rich and mighty king or queen who will bring the child fortune and glory.

Ten-year-old Deanna's mom and dad were fighting a lot. They worried about how the fighting was affecting Deanna. Deanna said she didn't care; she loved her parents very much, and she was too busy thinking about other things. Actually, she was busy dreaming about her egg donor, whom she would never know. Deanna's a great basketball player. She bets her egg donor is, too. Her parents certainly aren't. Deanna loves her long, swanlike neck. Both her parents kind of have stumps for necks. She must have her egg donor's neck. She imagines the time she and her donor will meet in a cafe, falling into each other's arms, overwhelmed with emotion. They won't be able to believe how much they look alike. Deanna will be at Harvard then, studying biology. Her egg donor will already be a well known scientist. They'll move in together and become a rich and famous duo. All the people from home who ignored Deanna in fifth grade will suddenly be clamoring for her attention. They'll want to meet her famous donor, too.

Deanna's family romance may indeed shield her from her parents' fighting. She might even be using it to get back at them for their fighting, erasing her parents and usurping them with the wonderful donor. But I don't think so. I know Deanna, and it seems clear that she is daydreaming about herself – her first forays away from home showered with grandiose fame and fortune. Her anonymous egg donor becomes the perfect hook to hang her hat on as she shapes her dreams for her own future.

Not all birth-other children are as lucky as Deanna, with her benign donor dream. Occasionally, the family romance turns into the family nightmare. As the time comes to forge their own identity, some children find themselves having to cut down to size the birth other who their parents and the books read to them have always presented in such glowing terms. They may start railing against the so-called nice person who gave the gift of sperm, eggs, or womb. Tyler was eleven when he rolled his eyes at me and pronounced scornfully, "Nice man, yeah, right. I bet you he just did it for the money." The adopted child might have to dismiss his birth father as having just done it for the sex and then abandoning him. But the birth-other child might now have to face a more chilling thought – that the donor or surrogate didn't even do it for fun, but for money. Some gift.

⁴² L.L. Warner, "Family Romance Fantasy Resolution in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, vol 48 (1993): 379-397.

In fantasy, your child may glorify the birth other. Your child may defame the birth other. Your child may simply incorporate the birth other into the family, particularly if that person is an active participant. It doesn't matter which way it goes. That person may play a very active role in your children's fantasy life as they begin to shape their own identity. In my own practice, all the children I have worked with who know they have a donor have shown an interest at one time or another in the person who helped make them. In that way, they're just like adopted children and adults I've worked with. It helps them pin down their own identity. With limited information at their disposal, sometimes they'll feel compelled to construct an actual parent in fantasy. I still hold that it's important to refer to the birth other in terms other than "mother" or "father," but that does not mean the children will do the same. Let's remember that no matter what we label the donor or surrogate, we cannot control a child's inner fantasy life. In the chambers of the family romance, children may still transform "birth other" into "parent." That doesn't mean they're bewildered or confused. They're just fantasizing – playing an identity game like any other child, calling on the imagined birth other as their king or queen.

Occasionally, the romance goes beyond play, and then we have to pay attention. For children with a missing piece, they may need to construct a parent where there was none. I am reminded of Kira, a child born to a single mother with an anonymous donor. At age eight, Kira had taken to adopting all the men in her life as father figures, going so far as calling her next-door neighbor Daddy. At age eleven, she fabricated a tale to her entire school about her father who had traveled with her and her mother to Canada. If pushed to the wall, she would say that she wasn't lying. She has a father. She just doesn't know where he is. So what's a little white lie about going to Canada?

In a culture that assumes all children have both a mother and a father, it is hard to forge an identity without one. So Kira pretends to her whole school that she has one. Her mom, Barbara, handled it in a warm and caring way. She acknowledged to Kira how nice it would be to have a father and how much she knew that Kira wished she had one. At the same time, she got Kira back on good footing in her identity quest by reminding her that all her schoolmates and teachers would support her for who she really is, a vibrant and wonderful girl who has a mom but no dad. A family romance spinning out of control, shared with the world as fact rather than fancy, marks the time for a parent to step in, offering gentle support and understanding but setting the record straight about reality.

Now we come to Annie. Annie knew that she was much smarter than her father. This often caused her great embarrassment when her friends came over because she hung out with the brainy crowd, and they all had mothers and fathers who were intellectual whizzes. She knew that her sperm donor had been a medical student who was now an up-and-coming cancer researcher. Although she would not be able to contact him until she was eighteen, in her fantasies she pressed "delete" for her dad and replaced him with her "real" father, her sperm donor who would take her to medical conferences. In her imaginings, all her friends would be totally impressed with his awards and accomplishments and shower her with compliments. She dealt with the extra piece in her family, the donor, in this way to consolidate her identity as an honor student and future PhD. The only problem was when, like Kira, she put her fantasy into action, telling new people she met that her father was a doctor. Like Barbara, her parents had to set the record straight for her. But her parents also needed some help to understand that Annie's fantasy, as long as it stayed just that, was not delusional or destructive or even repudiating of her own family – it was just Annie trying to work with her extra piece of the puzzle in sorting out who she was.

Children engage in family romances to figure out their own identities: Am I a child with a father (or mother) or not? Am I a child with two fathers, or not? No matter how you craft your story to your children, much of it is out of your hands as your children carry on with their own lives and try to make sense of their full identity in the context of all the people they carry within them. Here, it is the village inside, rather than the village out there, that your children actively engage with as they shape their own identity.

Whose Blood Pulses through Me?

Recall that around age ten children may begin to wonder about who the donor or surrogate is. Sometimes the wish to know explodes in adolescence. Even if they have known the birth other all their lives, that person begins to take on new meaning. Children are rapidly changing both cognitively and emotionally and come to realize the significance of the birth other to their own being. They're now able to envision their future, not in grandiose fantasy but in reality. It dawns on them that if they have a donor, that person will be carried on into their own children's genes someday. By now they are understanding what it means to inherit nearsightedness or allergies from the people who made them. They may feel a new need to know who their siblings are – not just so they don't marry them but so they can meet people of their own generation who carry some of the same genes they do. So the adolescent desire to find out about the donor or surrogate or half siblings is not just a search for belonging. It's also fundamentally a search for the self.

Your children are growing up in a society that still places a great deal of weight on blood ties and genetic origins: parents are the people who make you. Your children are simultaneously growing up with the new consciousness of social parenting: parents include the people who intended to have you and the people who raise you. Our society leaves your children with no choice but to negotiate both concepts of parent – those who make you and those who raise you – as they leave their families and consolidate their sense of who they are and who they came from.

All children conceived with a birth other who have been told about it will need to forge an identity that incorporates the fact that they were not a product of a sexual union between two adults. They will know that they were conceived through a scientific procedure that involved a person who is not their parent but who helped bring them into the world. Even "turkey baster" children, born of the simplest form of assisted reproductive technology, will know themselves to be products of science rather than sex, as basic as that scientific method may be. They may self-identify as tubesters. Some have even taken to thinking of themselves as "half-adopted." They're like adopted children because there's a birth someone out there who isn't raising them but who shares their genes and participated in making them. They're not like adopted children because there's another birth someone who helped make them and is also right there raising them.⁴³ That's what makes them only "half."

Children find their own creative ways of incorporating their birth-other origins into their identity. Actually, I have yet to meet a child or to have heard of an individual conceived with a birth other who complained, "I wish my parents had never told me. Why did they have to do that?" Around identity issues, the biggest complaint I've come across is the sadness, resentment, or confusion when someone grew up forging one identity only to have it torn asunder when discovering that the parent he or she thought was his or her genetic parent turned out not to be.

When that happens, a person has to recalibrate his or her identity, whether at age ten, fifteen, thirty, or fifty. First, they'll face the initial disruption, "So who am I anyway?" It's as if the whole world has been temporarily turned topsy-turvy. Then they have to find their footing again, reshaping their identity with the new knowledge that their parent is not their genetic parent and that someone else is responsible for half of their genetic make-up. Amanda Turner, a psychologist in England, studied the cases of sixteen people from the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Canada who had not been told they were donor-insemination babies until they were

⁴³ See Roseanna Hertz (The Father as an Idea: A Challenge to Kinship Boundaries by Single Mothers" *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 25, no. 1. 2002) for a discussion of the concept of half-adopted and its meaning to children and their single mothers in donor-insemination families.

adults. She found that many experienced shock, feeling their whole identity was threatened. They coped with their identity disruption by developing fantasies about the donors, what we might call a belated family reverie.⁴⁴

If such late discovery should happen to your child, all is not lost. His or her identity will not be permanently shattered. It's just that he or she will have to do some remedial work, to go back and engage in the family reveries with your support and involvement and come forward again with a new answer to "Who am I?"

Does It Matter If You Never Know You Have a Birth Other?

What about the identity issues if your children are never told about their origins? To date, the studies have only followed children who don't know into their adolescence, and none of the studies has directly addressed identity issues. And as these children become adults, they would be a difficult group to study. They themselves do not identify as individuals born with a birth other, so how would we find them to study? But here's what I can surmise from the children we know about. They're no different from any other child who grows up with one or two parents and accepts those parents as the real parents, the ones you take totally for granted. Let's challenge for a moment the traditional notion that blood ties are the cornerstone of identity. If they're not, it shouldn't make any difference at all that these children don't know. They grow up with parents who love them and shepherd them from birth to adulthood, all the while mirroring to them a sense of self from the intimate bonds that are forged. That's the stuff of healthy identity formation.

Yet what about a mom's sudden silence when a passing stranger says, "Oh, what a beautiful child! Where did she ever get those blue eyes?" Or what about the very special relationship that develops between Uncle Bob and little Joey, when Uncle Bob has nine other nephews but no other for whom he, unknown to Joey, is the sperm donor? Recall my notion of the inner village, composed of all the child's internalized relationships within the family matrix-with parents, with the birth others, with the birth others' significant others, with siblings and half siblings. Obviously, when a child isn't told, there will be an empty place where the birth other won't reside because the child has no awareness he or she exists. But those members of the family matrix who do know will be holding that person in their minds. They will also be holding the child in mind as someone who was made with the assistance of a donor or surrogate.

So far, we have no evidence to suggest that these children grow up compromised in their subjective sense of who they are in the world, even if based on incomplete or erroneous knowledge about the self. The only evidence we have at our disposal comes from the people who forged an identity based on not knowing and then had that taken away from them when they later found out. They repeatedly say they always knew something was askew. Maybe they're just imagining it after the fact; maybe they're a select small group - the people who always suspected and go on a search to find out. Others who never suspected may remain content with who they are. I don't have any conclusive data to offer you, but I just want to leave you with one question to think about: Is it possible children have an unconscious way of knowing that defies everyone's intentions not to tell, the unthought known, and that such inner rumbling might end up striking a discordant note in the symphony of your child's identity formation?

⁴⁴ BBC News, "Shock of Sperm Donor Babies." (August 31, 2000) news.bbc.co.uk

INGREDIENTS FOR HEALTH

Everything suggests that children born with the assistance of a donor or surrogate can grow up to become healthy and happy adults. They may even be stronger for their experience. But now you know that there are some key ingredients to ensure your children's success. You need to be ready to hold your child, in every sense of that word, with a commitment to working out your own anxieties so you can think clearly enough to provide your child with the love and the support and guidance he or she will need. Rather than foreclosing fantasy, you'll do best to open it up as much as you can, allowing for both family reveries and family romances to unfold. Childhood is always a work in progress, in which you will need to allow room for the ebb and flow of the experience over time so your children can develop both a strong, positive sense of identity and a clear sense of family belonging. As challenging as it might be, you need to create space for the dark as well as the bright feelings.

Parents, however, are only one piece of the village. Until our society rids itself of reproductive technophobia and makes room for all different kinds of families, your children may suffer. Until the scientific community pays more careful attention to the laboratory manipulations that may compromise a child's healthy development and corrects them wherever possible, your children may suffer. And until the professional community conducts further research and provides more counseling and supportive services to families turning to assisted reproductive technology, both children and parents may suffer.

In the meantime, a child grows through us. As your children grow, they may wonder if the donor or surrogate ever thinks about them. The birth other may be wondering about your child. You may be wondering what your child is thinking about the donor or surrogate. You may wonder what your child is thinking about you. As all this goes round and round, your child may be left with gaps. He or she may need to mourn a missing piece or accept extra ones. It is a challenge for a child. Sometimes, it is so much a challenge that parents and a supportive community are not enough to help a child through. If that happens, an empathic and understanding psychotherapist sensitive to the experiences of birth-other families may be able to provide a "room of one's own" for your child to sort through the feelings of being different, establish a sense of belonging, and forge a positive identity based on a complicated inner village. But most of the time, the main thing the child needs is you – to come through. And the mission will always be the same – to raise a whole and healthy child.