



# Child Development... As It Relates to Children's Understanding of and Interest in Donor Conception (Ages 0 – 7)

## Introduction

The most important thing for parents to recognise is that all children are different...even completely genetically connected siblings can be very different from their parents and each other...in looks, temperament, personality, talents, likes and dislikes...and very often in their thoughts and feelings about donor conception. Think of the differences in your own family of origin.

The ages and stages given below are very approximate. Occasionally children show they understand the rudiments of donor conception at well under five years of age but most will be seven, eight or nine before they really grasp how they came into being and children in heterosexual couple families may be even older before they fully comprehend that DC means that they are not genetically connected to one parent, or both.

It is easy for parents to confuse normal developmental behaviour with assumptions of problems to do with donor conception. Always consider what is 'normal' or age-appropriate before attributing behaviour to some consequence of their beginnings.

## Babies and Infants

Babies of course do not understand the meaning of the words we use at this pre-verbal stage, but they do get a strong message from the emotional climate in which they are raised. Parents who feel confident, talk with their baby lovingly and handle him or her securely will build up a relationship where the baby can rely on their needs being met, thus ensuring the development of a solid emotional attachment between parents and child. It is the quality of this attachment that is likely to be most meaningful for a child rather than any genetic connection.

For those of us who have conceived with the help of donated eggs, sperm or embryos there is no reason not to include talk about how our baby came into being whilst undertaking all the routines of baby-care – feeding, changing, putting down to sleep etc. This way you will be starting to establish the connections in your baby's brain by associating the words to do with their donor beginnings; but probably, and most importantly, you will be practising the foundations of a life-long conversation that will be built up bit by bit over the years. A real bonus of talking with your baby this way is that you will be freed from the worry about when to start talking with your child because you have already started!

## Infancy to Four

This is a time to take *every* naturally occurring opportunity to introduce your child to the idea that there are lots of different sorts of families and ways for children to come into families. If someone you know is pregnant you might want to say that sometimes mummies (and daddies) need some help to make a baby grow.

You can add, on another occasion, that it takes a sperm or seed from a daddy and an egg from a mummy to make a baby and on yet another day, add that sometimes a daddy doesn't have enough seeds or a mummy doesn't have enough eggs and they need some help from another man or woman (or both). And as the months pass you may then want to remind them of this conversation (at a time when the subject of pregnancy or babies has come up in some other way) and add that this is the way they were made.

The world will not end...your child will not turn round and say, 'but that means you're not my real mummy/daddy...because, as stated earlier, what is important for small children is the quality of the emotional relationship with the people who care for them everyday. Often, young children given this information will simply change the subject. But you will have installed a 'hook' that you can hang future conversations and information on.

Around two or three (but don't worry if it is later) is a good age to start introducing the appropriate My Story or Our Story book. Cuddling up with a book is a great way of cementing family relationships and children often love the books – particularly if you put their picture and other pictures of the family at the end.

## **Four to Seven**

At around age four many children start asking where babies come from. This is all part of the normal curiosity of a young child whose job it is to make sense of the world they see around them, including how the human body works. Our job, as parents, is to give simple, direct information in a matter of fact way. Put yourself in your child's naïve and curious shoes and answer the question they ask, not what you as an adult think they are asking. Always remember that it has nothing to do with sex as understood in an emotional and physical sense by an adult.

If you have already started talking with your child about donor conception, remind them of these previous conversations and repeat the simple information you have given before. See the Telling and Talking 0-7 booklet for further suggestions of language to use.

Many parents worry that their child will start talking with others about their beginnings and may be teased or bullied as a result. Our experience is that mostly young children do not talk about it because it is something they have not yet understood and don't really have an interest in. If they do say something to friends, the subject usually gets changed pretty quickly because the friends don't understand either!

Sometimes children in single parent or lesbian families are subject to close questioning from other children about not having a dad. Ways to handle this situation are addressed in the Telling and Talking 0 – 7 booklet. It can be helpful to inform each primary school class teacher about DC so that they can support your child should something come up in class or the playground. This doesn't often happen for children in heterosexual couple families until after age 7.

Your child may show an early interest in and curiosity about their origins or they may be completely disinterested. Both and many shades in-between are completely normal. The job of parents is to feel as confident and comfortable as possible and look for moments to remind their children of previous conversations and add little bits of information as the opportunities arise in everyday life. Thus are solid foundations laid.

You may find the DCN publication 'Primary School Resources' for parents, children and teachers, helpful.

