

# TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR CONCEPTION: A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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## INTRODUCTION

Science and technology have made strides in reproductive techniques that have previously been the fantasy of science fiction. More and more methods of circumventing various infertility problems are being developed at an unparalleled rate. The options on the menu of paths to parenthood are ever increasing, enriching, confusing and sometimes overwhelming the decision-making process for patients. Inevitably each time a patient moves forward into a higher tech procedure, they have more questions than we have answers. The legal, psychological, ethical and moral outcomes of many of the ways children can now be created remain, in part, unknown to us. While donor sperm insemination has been practiced for the last century or so, we still know very little of the welfare of those offspring. While Louise Brown, the first person to be born from in vitro fertilization, will be 17 years old this year, we similarly know very little about how children who have knowledge of their unique conceptions feel about what they know.

For several years the Psychological Special Interest Group of the American Fertility Society, now the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, has debated the question of whether or not children conceived from third party reproduction should be told of the unique ways they may have been conceived or gestated. We have attempted to examine the relative merits of disclosure versus non-disclosure of a child's genetic origins. Researchers have explored what, if anything, patients are actually choosing to tell their children (Klock and Maier, 1991). Papers have been presented suggesting various ways parents may overcome any objections they may have to talking with their children (Mahlstedt, 1994). Now we are bringing together our wealth of knowledge about families, child development, coupling, and parenting and attempting to take what we as mental health professionals already know about all of these areas and apply them to a field that is burgeoning faster than we can keep up. If we are not sure what to say to children, perhaps we can go back and look at what we do know children want or need to know about themselves and their families, indeed their world. Once we have reviewed those topics, we can apply that knowledge to the various methods of technological family building.

This paper will specifically address the issue of talking to children about their third or fourth party conceptions as well as the issue of incorporating sex, conception, reproduction, and adoption. While the story of a child's birth may and probably would eventually consist of the story of conception in a laboratory petri dish, it is not a necessary component for the development of a healthy self-concept or formation of a strong identity for a child to know they were conceived through in vitro fertilization or husband insemination or any other procedure allowing a couple to have a fully biogenetic child born to them. Finding out about a high-tech conception without the use of a third person most likely will not have significant, lasting effects on a child. Whether a couple has intercourse or surgery to conceive is relatively inconsequential to a child except perhaps in the degree to which they perceive they were wanted and then cherished by the individuals who intentionally and with great effort created them. In almost



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all cases, however, children should be told if they are being parented by at least one parent to whom they are not genetically related, or if they were not born through their mother's uterus.

Childrearing is a widely varying, subjective experience. Parents' histories, psychological make-up, mental health, stress level, or religious beliefs, all may contribute to the ways in which children are parented. Surveying the actual ways people parent their children gives us a general idea of existing parenting practices; however, it does not tell us what is most advantageous to children. In the absence of information, individuals will gravitate toward the known and familiar. This is also true of issues pertaining to parenting after infertility. Each parent will bring their unique style and personality to all aspects of parenting, including if, how, and when children are told about how they were conceived and born. Certain guidelines, however, are helpful. It is hoped that parents resolve, to the greatest extent possible, residual issues of loss and grief before bringing children into their lives; undeniably the ways in which parents feel and think about the technology, donor, surrogate, gestational carrier or birthparents employed to ultimately become parents will effect the ways in which they communicate with their children.

### **KIDS SAY THE DARNDDEST THINGS**

Imagine what Art Linkletter would say about today's kids. "Kids say the darndest things" has taken on a whole new meaning as we work our way through this last decade of the twentieth century. Take, for example, the bedtime comment of my almost-four-year-old. "Oh, I get it, Mommy!" he exclaimed excitedly. "First I grew inside the other lady. Then, when I was ready to come out, they took me out of her and put me inside you so I could come out of you!" His child's view of his ovum donation conception was amusingly close to accurate. He was piecing together bits of information to form a new concept. Using the thinking of a pre-schooler, he believed he had always existed; it was merely a question of location and transportation that needed to be worked out. He was trying to understand his arrival the same way he constantly tried to figure out everything about his world. His daily barrage of questions indicated his ever-curious, rapidly-whirring mind: "Where did the first tree come from?" "Where does the sun go when it's nighttime?" "Could I hear you talking when I was growing inside you?" He made no differentiation between trying to understand the ways of the world, and the ways of the reproductive magic that brought him to me.

Children are naturally curious about everything. A child of average intellect will want to ask questions about anything that comes into her head. The degree to which those questions will be raised will depend, perhaps to a large degree, 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 them there is indeed a difference. The inference they draw from the message not to ask those questions could be erroneous and damaging to the way in which the child perceives their entrance into the life of mom and dad.



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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. This accounts for the common experience of having information we have given to children come back to us in such a convoluted, distorted form that it is unrecognizable as what we originally attempted to convey. Anne Bernstein, author of *The Flight of the Stork* (Perspectives Press, 1994) has provided great insight into how children process information about sex and reproduction at various ages. Her interviews with children elicited hilarious statements, revealing that our best efforts at explanations may be thwarted by the limitations of their developmental stage.

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."

If explanations of sex are about birds and bees, why can't they also be about chickens, ducks, cows or goats? One minute babies arrive like farm animals, then from a seed planted inside a woman (is that with or without planting soil?), and the next minute they come from a hospital. One woman remembered her father taking her to the hospital where he pointed out "the place we got all you kids." Thus, this woman believed one got a baby by putting in a purchase order at the hospital. Her father ran a business out of the home, handling daily purchase orders. It was only logical that he had sent out a purchase order for her as well. One man interviewed remembered his father explaining that a woman knows the baby is coming long before it arrives. He surmised that getting a baby was very much like going to a bakery—you go to the hospital, get a number. When your number is called, you collect your baby and go home. Yet another woman interviewed by Bernstein remembered thinking that babies were born when the baby turned the knob of a small door in the sleeping mother's back and walked out. If only it were that simple! (Infertility patients may feel similarly while in the midst of the frustrations of unsuccessful treatment. Clients tell me: "I don't know how I'm going to 'get' a baby, but eventually I will 'get' one." The language is similar to their language of a child. If one cannot make, grow or give birth to a baby as the rest of the world does, then one must "get" one from a number of other sources.)

The magical thinking of children certainly does not take into account the anguish of infertility. Many children believe a baby "comes" when a man and a woman get married and want a baby. If the couple does not want a baby it does not come. Imagine a time when we might have felt that powerful! How might those four-year-olds explain the pain of those who so very much want a child and the baby just won't come? And isn't their view so like that of the advice-givers who emphatically suggest that if the patient relaxes or wants it badly enough or resolves the conflicts preventing conception "it" will happen?

## WHO WILL TELL

Through the ages parents have struggled with how and when to communicate information to their children about sex. It has become a political debate as to whether the schools should educate students about the mechanics of sex or allow families to pursue the birds and bees at their discretion—when, where and how they want their children to receive the information. But for those for whom sex and reproduction were not related events, one wonders how they could leave the telling up to the schools. A scenario difficult to imagine is the junior high



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school physical education teacher, begrudgingly assigned to teach health education to 12-year-old seventh graders, teaching them about the various ways families may be built when sex fails to produce a conception. Perhaps he might tell them that if all else fails, children may be created by buying some donor sperm, mixing it in vitro with a recruited donor's ovum, and placing the resulting pre-embryo in a surrogate's uterus? Someday this may be part of school curriculum, though I am not sure I would want that P.E. teacher explaining to my sons the complexities of how they were created.

### WHAT TO SAY

Parents may begin talking to children about their conceptions the minute the child enters their lives. This may be at birth, or in the case of adoption, sometime after birth. In most cases it is not exactly conception the parents are communicating 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 donor gave what was needed so this child could be in their life. Children may be told they have the donor's hands, the surrogate's beautiful green eyes, their birthmother's toes. They may say how grateful the parents are to the doctor (and donor, surrogate, birthmother, etc.) who made it all possible and how precious the children are to mom and dad. Books are an extremely useful tool for introducing the subject of conception and birth when it might otherwise seem awkward to do so. They may read books specifically about adoption or how babies are born, of which there are many available for preschoolers, or they may read books written for children in which the more subtle theme is adoption or blended families or the way babies become part off families. Parents need to reflect on what feelings may arise after making these comments or after reading certain books. Is the language too awkward? Do they feel threatened by mentioning the third party involved in the child's conception? The pre-verbal months provide a perfect opportunity to try on the multitude of ways one can talk to their kids about their conceptions. Children will pick up on the non-verbal, the touch, the affect, the giggle. One of my clients had her support group laughing when she immodestly shared 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 usually 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.

Parents should always speak the truth, but not necessarily the whole truth every time. They should use accurate, positive language. The truth is that 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." My own children were about seven years old before they finally asked what a uterus looks like and where it is. My youngest son queried that a uterus must be very, very big, or

how could a baby grow in it? It is easier for children and adults to form a new concept, learn a new idea, than to change an already existing construct. It is more productive to hear the word ‘uterus’ without understanding exactly where it is or what it is than to imagine a baby and food in the same place, then to later have to adapt that information when cognitively able.

## WHEN TO TELL

Some adoption literature indicates children should be “told” of their adoptions around the ages of five to seven. Reuben Pannor and Annette Baran, authors of *Lethal Secrets*, suggest that because of the complex nature of technological conceptions children should be told of their gamete donation conceptions at age nine or ten. Certainly there are aspects of ARTs that are beyond the comprehension of a young child, whereas a young adoptee might initially only need to understand that he grew in and was born to one woman or family, and then came to be in another family. But I strongly disagree with Pannor and Baran’s age suggestions regarding adoption or third or fourth party reproduction. Whether through adoption, surrogacy, gestational carrier, or gamete donation, children need to 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 a third party reproduction 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.

Freud said we are who we will be by the age of five. Elementary age children are developing their place in the world. They are figuring out how they do or do not fit in at school, who they want to hang out with, how they want to dress, what they think about different subjects, who they agree or disagree with, and where they belong. They are preparing for adolescence, a time when the seeds planted now will root deeply and grow quickly. From ages ten to thirteen, which Bernstein calls the Theoretician and Reasoner stages, they will take all the information they have been given about reproduction and start to make sense out of it. 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, in fact in the way that most people 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 begin to form an identity about who they are quite early. It is easier for them to incorporate into that forming identity a notion of a perhaps unknown person that helped bring them into the world than to have to change a mindset about who they are. It is easier, for example, for a child to hear the word “ovum” without being able to conceptualize what that is than to imagine themselves being formed from the thing they dye at Eastertime and having to reconceptualize that as their cognitive development allows. 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



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a microscopic sperm and ovum meeting, growing inside a place we cannot see and ending up being the baby they have seen in home videos. 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. So another woman gave me her ovum so that he could grow inside me and be my son. From this he concluded that there are four shapes you learn in pre-school—square, circle, rectangle and ovum.

Many of us have heard humorous stories about children's reporting of "where they come from." My oldest son was in kindergarten when the four kids at his work table started talking about where they each came from. One kid said he came from Philadelphia, another from Santa Monica, yet another from his mother's tummy. "Not me," my son proudly announced. "I came from my birthmother." That provided us with an interesting opportunity to talk with his classmates and teachers about adoption and family building. But it also pointed out that all of those children were still in the Geographer's stage of understanding conception and birth. For them it was not a question of how they came into the world, but from where they entered it, just as my younger son was attempting to figure out how he had gotten into my uterus if there was another person involved.

The manufacture, location and transportation of babies are the primary interests of children up to about age seven or eight. As they move into what Bernstein calls the In-Between stage (ages five to ten), old thoughts mingle with the new. Conceptual housecleaning occurs, a time of transition. But what happens if there were no "old" thoughts about a genetic link or uncommon way of being conceived to be mingled with the new? What happens when there is nothing to transition from at a time of transition? Discussions begin to be quite challenging around this time. Based on a child's social milieu, they may believe love and marriage are the precursors to getting a baby. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Sally in the baby carriage. Rules make the world safe. About this time adopted children may begin to wonder why they were adopted. They are not wondering why their parents adopted them; that explanation is relatively simple for them to understand. They are really asking why their birthparents could not or did not parent them? Did they not love each other? Were they not married? If not, doesn't that break the rules of conception? Children need a lot of room to keep asking these questions as they try to piece the incoming answers together. The puzzle is taking shape, but there are many pieces missing. When children are told early that their parents very much wanted a baby but could not make one themselves, children do not presume that love and marriage are necessary for a baby to enter their lives and may not have confusion when they later realize that unmarried people also have babies.

### **LOOKING FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO EDUCATE**

In addition to answering the actual questions children ask, parents can also look for opportunities to raise the issue of a child's conception and birth and not wait for children to ask. Generations of adopted individuals were raised in families where they were told of their adoptions and it was never mentioned again. We now know that although those children did not ask questions, they had many. We need to try to answer the questions children are asking; but in addition, we can suggest future questions by adding information to what might in itself be a simple inquiry. When my oldest son was about three-and-a-half years old we played on the floor with his plastic animals. While he weaved tales of this or that monster, I noticed that he

was holding the lion and I the tiger. Then he gifted us with the following story:

“... Then the mama lion took its baby tiger into the cave to protect it.”

“Oh,” I replied, “the lion is the tiger’s mama.”

“Yeh.”

I went for the opening and seized the opportunity. “The mama and the baby don’t look alike,” I said. “The tiger has stripes and the lion doesn’t.”

“Cuz the tiger’s mama got dead so the mama lion ‘dopted it,” he quickly answered.

“Oh,” I clarified, “just like you and mommy don’t look alike. You have blond hair and I have dark hair but we are still a family. The tiger needed a mama and the lion needed a baby to love and now they’re a family.”

This dialogue could have been approached from a number of different angles. I could have pursued the issue of what had happened to the tiger’s birthmother. I was intrigued that he immediately decided that the reason she could not take care of her tiger baby was that she was dead. But at that moment I really wanted him to focus on the fact that families come in all different shapes and sizes and appearances. Some family members look very much alike and others look quite different from each other but they are still a family. My son’s comments also gave me insight into some of his thoughts. It told me he was thinking about adoption, even at such a young age. (Many Disney stories are about the loss of a parent and subsequent adoption). I was also able to surmise that he was already forming an assumption about his own birthmother’s story, though he was too young to ask directly. What other conclusion could a three year old come to but that a birthmother had died? Why else would a mother not mother her children? His comment alerted me that the next time I had the chance I needed to drop the hint that there might be many reasons a tiger mama could not care for her “young”. And as he has grown and matured, we have been able to talk about the fact that children usually look like their mothers and fathers because they are made from them and the information that makes a person who they are is inside the ovum and sperm. Therefore, he is probably like his birthmother and birthfather in ways he may not be like us. At the same time we have had the opportunity to discuss with my younger son that he is like the woman who donated her ovum and like daddy because he is a combination of the two of them, even though he grew inside of me.

### **TO “DO” OR NOT TO “DO” SEX**

There is a difference between being “told” a piece of information and “knowing” it. Learning is a process of integration. There was never a time when my children did not hear information about ovum donation, adoption, birthparents. Yet they are just now, at ages seven and eight, beginning to understand what our carefully chosen words mean. Now they are in what Bernstein calls the Manufacturer and In- Between stages. They imagine babies being built in ways that are within their realm of experience. Children this age are quite literal. My children want to know exactly how the doctor did the operation that made my youngest son (GIFT). My oldest son had just entered first grade when he asked me if I had ever “done” sex. It was a somewhat logical question since he knew that neither he nor his brother had been conceived by me in the usual way. When I answered his question, his face scrunched, his forehead furrowed, his mouth looked like he had bitten a lemon. “With Daddy?” he finally asked reluctantly. It was an image he was loathe to consider. “Do you know what that means?” I asked him. “Yes,” he replied. “It’s when a boy gets on top of the girl, puts his penis in her ‘pagina’ and they move around a lot.” Most children this age, including my own, believe that sex is something one does if they want to have a baby. If you don’t want a baby, you don’t do it because it’s ‘disgusting.’ Therefore, since my son knows that mom and dad wanted a baby for a long time before adopt-



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ing him, they probably had to have sex. But it was probably only once and only because they wanted to make a baby. My other son has proclaimed that he wants to be a dad when he grows up, but plans to adopt a baby so he does not have to “do” sex.

### THE FIRST TELLING

While we have always freely used the language of adoption and gamete donation in our home, the official first telling was when our sons were two-and-a-half and three-and-a-half years old. We were in a cabin in the Teton National Forest, fireside, cozily snuggling a child on each of our laps. (Most of our conversations about sex or adoption or ovum donation take place either at bedtime, while snuggly, or while driving in the car, where there is no escape and little distraction). My husband, the storyteller in the family, weaved the true story of how they came to be in our lives, in the style of a fairy tale, using their names. It was a true-life once upon a time, putting them in the center of the stories. We were prepared for this story because we had been practicing and because we were comfortable with the ways we had built our family, but the timing was unplanned and the story completely spontaneous. They probably understood little of what my husband said that night, but we now had a foundation on which to build the pyramid of their understanding.

We cannot learn multiplication until we know how to add. We cannot learn to read until we recognize letters and their sounds. So it is with communicating information to children about their conception. What they understand at age three is not what they will understand at age five or eight or thirteen. As with any aspect of education, information builds upon itself. Kids do not start school at a fourth grade level, creating maps of the United States. First they must learn where their house is. They learn about their own neighborhood, community, city. Children learn how they came into the world and into their families in the same way they integrate other kinds of information. They hear a story. They hear it again. But every time a child hears their birth story they interpret, embellish or change the facts to match their understanding. A client reports a story which illustrates this. After painstakingly and repeatedly telling her son the story of his adoption in language positively depicting his birthmother's choice as having nothing to do with him per se, he one day blurted that his birthmother had not “kept” him (a word she had never used) because she had too many children already. Though he was aware he had birth siblings living with his birthmother, his parents had never even remotely implied that that had been the reason for his adoption. He had taken two facts and put them together as cause and effect. ‘My birthmother has a lot of kids and I was adopted.’ We see this child's world view of herself as the center of the universe in children of divorced parents. Their magical thinking may lead them to the following conclusion: ‘My parents are divorced and I fight with my sister, therefore, my parents divorced because I fight with my sister.’ The parents' challenge is to help him eventually understand a complex set of circumstances which is outside the realm of comprehension for a young child. He will understand those circumstances differently at different stages until he ultimately has a better understanding of those complexities. This process cannot occur in the “one telling” scenario that took place in traditional adoption or a “one telling” to a child conceived through donor sperm or gestational carrier. In those children who may have been “told” once, never to discuss the subject again, we wonder what they did with the information they were told but could not, no matter how it was presented, understand what was told to them in its most complex form?



Children need an environment in which they can feel safe to blurt out their questions and thoughts; this can provide the parents opportunities to clarify misconceptions, build upon prior knowledge and gradually increase understanding. This will occur when parents bring children into their lives with pride not shame, 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. We are forging new roads. When there are no direction signs to guide us which way to turn we must turn to each other for our guidance. Sometimes the children will follow our lead. Sometimes the children are our guides. When we listen to the jewels of their thoughts, the path becomes clearer.

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