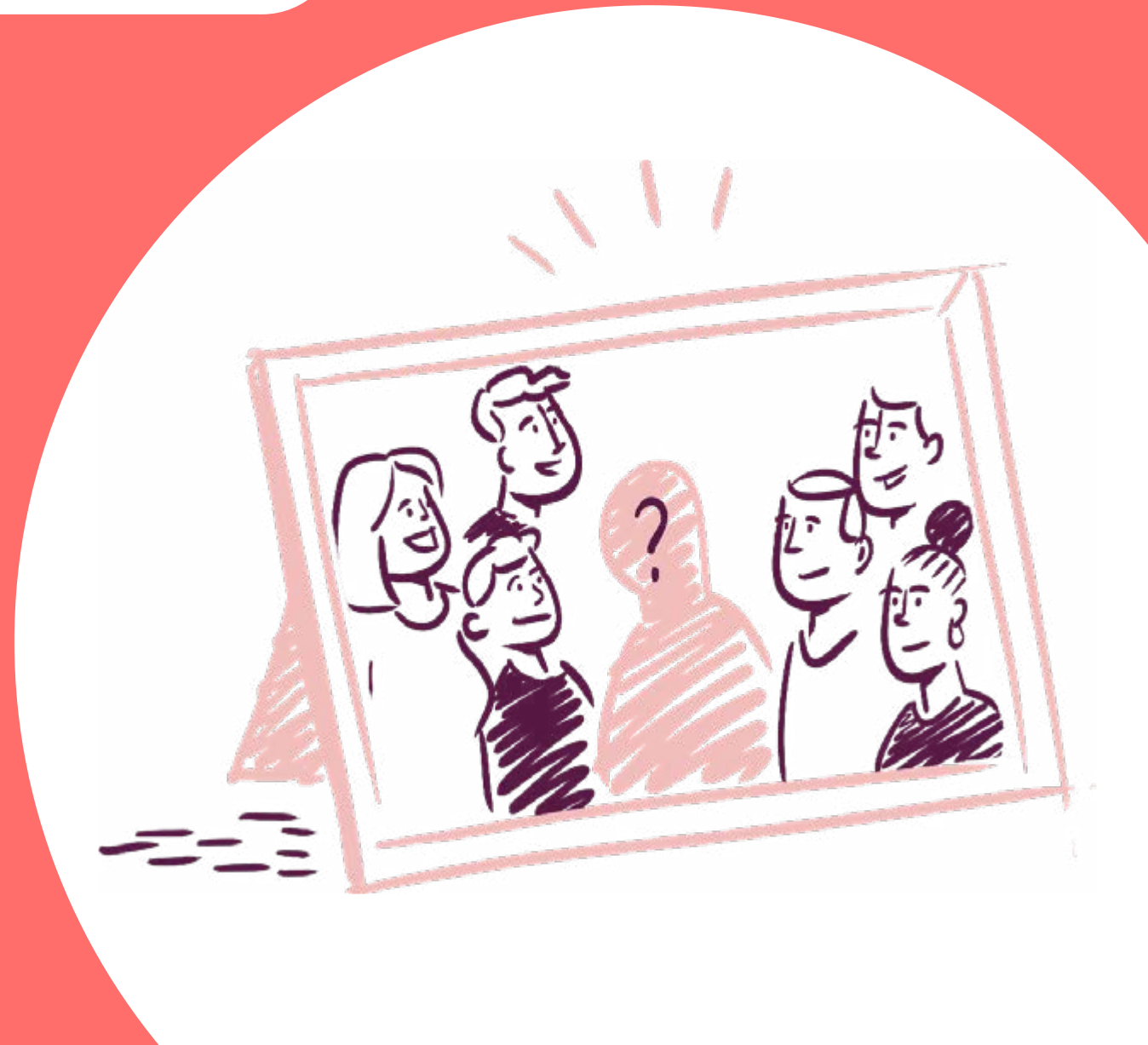


Stories of (possible) contact: Relatives of donors



Sperm and egg donors are not only donors. They are also children and perhaps partners, parents and siblings to their own relatives. They might be aunts, uncles and cousins. Their relatives may also feel themselves to be impacted by the donor's donation. Relatives' experiences are varied but their stories are seldom told.

The following accounts are based on interviews conducted as part of the [Curious Connections](#) and [ConnecteDNA](#) projects, based at the University of Manchester.

Some of these stories, and others like them, are also portrayed in this [short video](#).

All names and some details have been changed to protect participants' anonymity.





Louise

Louise first discovered that her sister, Kate, had donated eggs when she announced this rather matter-of-factly, via social media. For Louise, Kate's presentation of her donation as a straightforward gift of something which she had no intention of using herself allowed no room for anything other than celebratory responses.

Louise herself has mixed feelings about Kate's donation and the knowledge that it has led to the birth of two boys, in two different families. In principle, she saw egg donation as a really positive and generous act. At the same time, she knew she could never donate herself and found it hard to understand how her sister could (seemingly so easily) separate herself from those boys who had been born from her eggs. To Louise, these boys were family. They were nephews and, of particular importance to her, they were her own two children's only cousins, and she grieved the loss of these potential connections for them. Louise particularly struggled with knowing so little about the two donor conceived



boys. She wanted to know that they were okay but, although she knows there is the possibility of meeting them one day (Kate was an identity-release donor), she also knows that it may never happen.

Louise has not felt able to speak to Kate or her parents about the egg donation. She feared that Kate would be angry with her if she voiced her true feelings and did not expect that Kate would understand her perspective. She doubted whether Kate would feel she was entitled to an opinion on the donation. To Louise's surprise, her own father, usually somewhat traditional on family matters has been really supportive of Kate's decision.

Her Mum, on the other hand, has remained much quieter and Louise wonders if perhaps her Mum has similar misgivings which she too feels unable to voice.



Euan

Euan's wife Helen first raised the possibility of donating her eggs when her sister was having difficulties conceiving. There were no known issues with her eggs but nevertheless Helen spoke about how she would donate her eggs to her sister, if she ever needed them. It had never come to anything - no eggs were required - but Helen then decided she would also be happy to donate to help someone she did not know to have their family. She went on to complete one donation cycle as an identity-release donor. The couple do not yet know if any child has been born as a result.



Euan was overwhelmingly positive about his wife's decision to donate. He was proud of his wife and had supported her in doing this, including going to every appointment with her at the clinic and attending joint counselling. On occasion, he had played the role of devil's advocate - trying to make sure Helen had thought through how she might respond emotionally if, for example, a child contacted her who looked a lot like one of their own children.

Euan and Helen had been really open about the donation with friends and family and received universally celebratory responses. They had thought it was important to tell extended family as well as their own two children, particularly given the possibility that someone might 'come knocking on their door.' They had told their eldest daughter Mia (then aged eight) during the donation process - given all the hospital visits Helen was making, they did not want her to worry that she was sick. They had deliberately kept the conversation low-key and Mia had responded in kind, quickly changing the topic back to the latest Netflix drama she was hooked on!

Euan's understanding of the connections created through donation mirrored his wife's. For both of them, the children born from her donated eggs would not be her children. They were aware of the 'technical' fact that his children and any born from Helen's eggs would be biological half siblings. However, beyond the unlikely possibility that they started a relationship with this person, they did not attach much significance to this and didn't see them as 'brothers' or 'sisters'. Euan thought it fairly unlikely that anyone would contact them in the future and thought that non-contact would simply mean those children were busy living their own lives. He did not think it would be appropriate for him (or Helen) to be overtly interested in meeting the donor conceived children as that would suggest donating for the 'wrong reasons'.

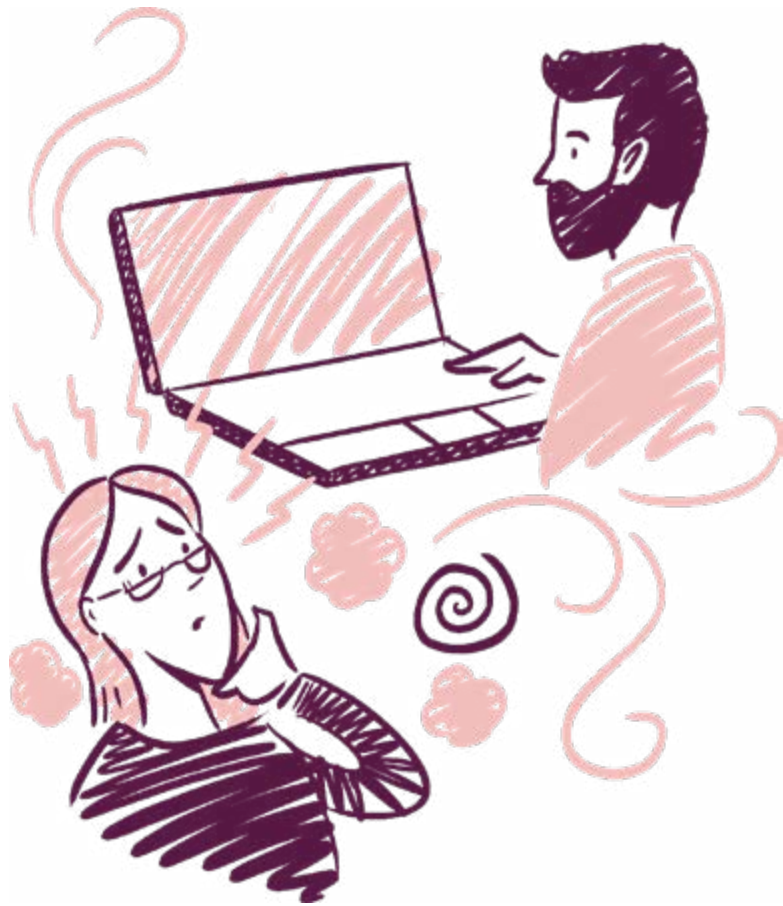




Angela

Angela found out that her husband, John, had been a sperm donor when she overheard him joking to someone else about the ‘greatest job he’d ever had’. She asked him about it but he dismissed it as unimportant. She described feeling sick at the idea, particularly the implications for their own daughter, but she let the conversation drop. Life was busy. Their daughter was barely walking.

The topic did not arise again for several years. This time, Angela and John were listening to a radio programme which talked about the experiences of donor conceived people searching for their anonymous donors. John had not previously considered this possibility but felt a duty to make himself contactable. He telephoned the clinic where he had donated to enquire about the process of making himself contactable and followed their instructions. To Angela’s relief, clinic staff gave the impression that contact was unlikely.



Angela again put the donations to the back of her mind. Until one day, by chance, John discovered an old message on a redundant social media account. The message was from a woman, on behalf of a small group of three, who had identified John as their sperm donor. At first she thought the message must be a scam. But when she saw looked up these people on social media and saw how much they resembled her husband, she knew it was real.

John felt it was more appropriate to make these connections through the 'official' channels and asked the group of donor conceived people to begin the process of counselling and mediated contact offered by the regulators. The women agreed and they all, Angela included, began the gradual process of figuring out how to make sense of these new connections.

Whilst the counselling has been invaluable, this process has been deeply distressing for Angela. The stark difference in how she and John understand the donation and the relationships created has caused serious difficulties in their marriage. For her husband, these

children are his ‘genetic offspring’; although he does feel a certain level of responsibility towards them, they are not his children or his family. He does not see that anything has radically changed in his own family by virtue of their contact. Angela, in contrast, feels that John is the father of these people and they are siblings to her own daughter. Something she does not want to be true but believes is the case.

Another aspect which Angela finds difficult is the perceived violation of the privacy of her family. She knows that he has been traced via Ancestry DNA testing but does not properly understand how this is possible given that neither her husband nor any of his immediate family are users of the site. She finds it hard that she does not know what others know about her. Have they for example seen photos of her daughter? Do they know where she and her husband work?

Angela also spoke about feeling excluded from the processes she is so deeply affected by. Her husband repeatedly talks about this as ‘his thing’ and clinic staff have also said they are unable to provide any information to her directly. She therefore has to ask John to get further information about, for example, how many other children have been born from his donations.

Angela is most concerned about the impact of all of this on her daughter. She has reluctantly accepted that she and her husband will have to tell her soon, in case they find out accidentally via some other route. They have planned that her husband will tell her a purely ‘genetic story’. Although she doesn’t agree that these connections are just genetic, she thinks it is better for her daughter to learn this version of the story, although she wonders whether she will accept it.



Stella

Stella's son, Michael, first told her about his donations a couple of years after he had completed the programme at an NHS clinic, informing her that there were (so far) three children born as a result. Her initial response had been one of concern as to whether he would have any financial obligations but, after he reassured her that this was not legally the case, she relaxed. Stella felt proud that Michael had done something to help others and she was pleased to learn that she had additional grandchildren 'out there'. She felt, as well as being a good person, her son had 'good genes' and this combination made him a great person to be a donor. That said, even if she had not liked the idea of Michael donating, she emphasised that it would still have been his decision to make.

The donation is not a big topic of conversation amongst the family but now and again Stella asks Michael for updates about 'his children.' She very much thinks of them as grandchildren



or perhaps ‘grandchildren in waiting’ or people with ‘grandchildren potential’. She is certainly curious about them and would love to meet them one day (which she hopes might happen if they contact her son). Stella looks forward to the possibility of looking for resemblances with her son and the wider family.

Stella talked very positively and slightly nostalgically about the idea of a big family, with everyone in and out of others’ houses, always something going on. She has long been encouraging one of her other sons (who has two children already) to have more – twins would be a particular blessing! The idea of meeting donor conceived grandchildren in the future therefore fits her vision of a big, slightly chaotic, extended family. In an ideal world she might like to know a bit more about them (school achievements, big news – the kinds of thing you might put in a Christmas card update). However, she is also aware that they may all be quite content and busy with their own families and lives and never get in touch, or not in her lifetime anyway.

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