

Talking about how your family was created

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Same-sex parents are often asked about how their families are created. Questions may come from your immediate or extended families or from people in the broader community: friends, neighbours, colleagues, health professionals, child-care workers and other parents.

Often these questions arise out of innocent curiosity and are asked in an appropriate and respectful way, making it easy to respond openly and positively. Sometimes you may have to deal with questions that are inappropriate or intrusive and which make you feel uncomfortable or judged.

How you handle these questions will depend on a range of factors. This topic provides some broad suggestions for dealing with conversations about how you created your family.

Managing questions

People may ask questions that appear judgemental or homophobic, but which might just be clumsy, ignorant or not thought through. It can be helpful to give people the benefit of the doubt sometimes, and perhaps offer some advice for next time.

People are commonly curious about:

- whether you used a known or anonymous donor
- whether you conceived at home or using a clinic

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- how you decided which partner would carry your child or provide sperm.

It's helpful to decide what information you are happy to divulge at various stages and to whom: immediate family, close friends and the broader community.

Gay dads may choose not to reveal who is the biological father of their child born through surrogacy and lesbian mums may not wish to share information about who is the biological mother once the baby is born.

Difficult conversations

You don't have to explain or come out to everyone all the time. Some days it might seem too hard or too complicated, or you might just not have the energy or the inclination.

If someone tells you, the non-biological parent, your child looks like you, you can just smile, or say thank you. You don't have to explain anything more.

Similarly, if someone starts up a conversation with a non-birth parent about pregnancy, birth or breast-feeding, you may choose to correct their assumptions, or you may choose not to, especially if that person is a stranger.

Conversations may change over time as circumstances and personal feelings alter and you may find you become more confident in handling difficult conversations.

Privacy

Talking to people can dispel myths, correct inaccuracies, or just make people feel more at ease with you and your family, which can lead to positive outcomes for your children. However, you may sometimes need to be very direct with people and explain that certain information is private, off-limits or belongs to your child. You may feel that the process of conceiving a child is personal and private and nobody else's business.

Parents say ...

Talking to family and friends

I explained it to my parents like I explained it to everybody else; just very straight-up and honest and answered their questions. **Maryann**

It's a real journey when you start wanting to have a child so we decided to tell our immediate family. We are both very close to our aunts and uncles so we told them as well – and some very close friends. We were not going to tell the world, but we knew we would need that support, especially if we did get pregnant and something happened. **Ell**

My immediate family knew we were embarking on surrogacy so we had a full and frank discussion with them. The only thing we held back was the identity of the egg donor, because we didn't want them to guess at biology. It's kind of obvious now – we've got two boys – but at the time we thought it was important and I suppose because my family is from Vietnam, blood is important to them. **Vien**

When I told my mum she said, 'Oh I don't know how we're going to love this child,' and I said, 'Get lost mum, I'm adopted! I'm not even related to you'. And she said, 'Ah yes, I suppose so'. She hadn't even really thought about that ... and Hannah was her first grandchild and she was all over her from the minute she was born. **Kate**

I think with your own family it's challenging to confront their ideas of norms about families – they want to know if they are really aunts, if they are really grandparents. I would reassure them that they are. **Mary**

With both Jeff and I – and I think this is fairly common – our mothers asked who was going to be the bio-dad and it was quite apparent they wanted to know because there was a sense of ownership over the grandchild. And I understand the reason they asked. Our response was always the same: the child has two fathers, the biology is not important and if you are going to be the grandmother of this child you'll love the child regardless of the biology. **Rodney**

We kept IVF very close to our hearts, along the same lines as straight people. They don't talk about their sex lives and whether they're trying to have a baby so we didn't want to do that either. **Helga**

I'm delicately balancing the situation with my family and I think I need to give them the space to talk to me about things, but I have also set up some limits as to what I will accept in conversations. **Mary**

Probably the most difficult conversation would have been with my grandmother who was of a much older generation, obviously, and less open in terms of perceptions of what acceptable relationships are, or acceptable families. I think she required time to absorb the information and really come to terms with it. **Jacki**

Talking to others

I spoke to one mum at school and explained how we talk about our family. I sent her the Rainbow Families Council link so that she could look on there at some of the resources.

She wrote back to me and said, 'Thanks, that was really helpful'. **Camille**

It's a bit different if you see two mums together – people assume so much more – whereas I'm dealing with it more as a single parent and people assume that I'm straight. But I think people are generally sensitive, so if you say up-front, 'She's an IVF baby,' they tend not to want any more information. **Helga**

From day one, be out – proactively out – in a simple way. Answer people's questions honestly, but if they ask you something ridiculous or you don't want to answer their questions, you just say, 'I'm not going to answer that,' or ask them the same question back. **Jason**

I'm a community worker. I work for a small faith community and a lot of assumptions have been made and I've just clarified them. **Maryann**

I do get a bit of curiosity and, I must admit, most of the time where it's a casual encounter I generally ignore it or don't go into detail. Part of it is convenience – taking the path of least resistance – because it's not straightforward; it's not a one-liner to explain the whole thing. **Vien**

You get the question about who is the bio-dad and most of the time you say, 'Ethan has two fathers and we don't talk to people about his biology because that's Ethan's information'. We're probably a little bit more concise than with family, and probably sometimes we're a little bit more blunt! **Rodney**

I work in the call centre industry and there's a large gay population so I probably had an easier experience than some. We believe in educating people; we think it's best to be up-front and educate them about your journey so if they come across anyone else in the same situation they can help. **Eli**

I'm in the corporate world and you talk to your clients about what you do at the weekend. I say, 'I've got a son,' and I'll pause and 90 per cent of the time I go on and say, 'It's kind of unusual circumstances – I've got a son with two mums'. I let them join the dots. To be honest, it's a delightful icebreaker; it takes the conversation to a deeper level in a lot of ways. **Brad**

I suppose what really comes out is that people are fascinated with how you have a baby. With my mother's group they really wanted to know how IUI works, how IVF works. So I suppose it's being comfortable enough in yourself to be open with people. You just decide what you're going to say. We're really open with our story. **Karla**

The first piece of information to divulge is that the child has two mothers and the nature of that relationship. So, I guess, make it clear that there is no father in the picture. I don't think I really had any in-depth discussions with anyone about donors. **Jacki**

Thoughts and suggestions

I'm really happy if people want to ask questions. I'm not offended because I'd rather just educate people and show them that it is a thought-out process and why I am confident that it's going to be okay. **Pia**

People at work asked me and I got a bit annoyed, because I thought: I didn't ask you how you conceived your children. But then I think: well I wouldn't ask you, but maybe it's about education – and then you have the conversation. I wouldn't necessarily tell everybody that asked; sometimes I don't really want to go there. It just depends on the situation. **Kate**

I've lived out east for a long time now and I've never experienced any homophobia. I say it how it is, not in a nasty way, just in a straight-out way and I think if you answer people's questions honestly, then there's no reason they shouldn't respect you. **Maryann**

Other people might say it's not anyone else's business, and I understand that, but I'm all for just giving the facts and having a more open, educational approach. If you just tell them, there is less mystery and they don't wind themselves up so much thinking about it ... it normalises it, I think. **Pia**

I was very up-front and straightforward – we both were – and just said, 'If you have any questions, please feel free to ask'. We preferred to give them the information. We think it's best to be up-front with people so if they come across anyone else on the journey, they can help them. **Eil**

I guess there's a little of the advocate in me. The more people who know about these stories, the better it is for us and for our community. So that they can recognise the people down the road aren't the only ones who are a same-sex couple with kids – there's also that guy they met at work during the week. **Brad**

I think the more open we are, the more people understand and the less they fear. The less fear they have, the less hate they have. **Eil**

It is very important for your children – once they are more than one or two years of age – that you are out and answering questions honestly because you don't want them to see you ashamed or embarrassed or uncertain. **Jason**

Some people will ask very probing questions and I don't have a problem with that at all. I think the more I can explain to people, the more they understand, the better for everyone, so there are very few things I won't answer. **Stephen**

I have to admit that in the first year or two, questions infuriated us. We felt judged, so our responses were often curt, but as your child gets older you think, *Okay, I need to have this discussion because I'm trying to prepare the landscape for my child to grow into.* **Rodney**



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