

Telling the kids: What? When? How?



Rainbow families can be created in lots of different ways, including with a sperm or egg donor known to the parents or sourced through a fertility clinic; through traditional or gestational surrogacy (usually overseas); or through previous heterosexual relationships.

Rainbow families might have two dads, two mums, a sole parent, more than two parents or step-parents.

At some stage, all parents will want to talk to their children about how they were created and this can raise some significant questions:

- What's the best time to start this conversation?
- How much information should I provide?
- What exactly should I say?

All children are different and develop at different stages and parents need to decide what's best for their child. This topic provides some broad

guidelines and suggestions on how best to begin this conversation with your child.

When and how

Start talking to your child as early as possible – any time between when they are babies and before they start school. It can be helpful to practice talking to them out loud before they are even old enough to understand.

Be open and honest with your child and tell them the truth. Use clear and accurate language that is

age-appropriate; most children can understand the idea of sperm and egg at a very young age.

You can tell your child about how they were created without talking about sex; that often comes much later. Some people use imagery of seeds, planting and growth to help explain the process.

Things to consider

Your child is much-wanted and is much-loved and it's important that you are positive about the journey you took to create them so they can also be positive. Be guided by your child and the questions they ask – they will generally let you know how much information they want.

It's important to acknowledge and be respectful of everyone involved in creating your child, including former partners, a sperm or egg donor and/or a surrogate.

Try not to let anyone make you feel embarrassed or shameful about how you created your family.

What can help

Conversations often happen in stages over time; you don't have to cover everything in the first discussion. To assist you with these conversations you might consider:

- talking to other parents whose family formation or experience is similar to yours
- creating a book or journal that explains the journey you took to create your child and includes names and photographs of all the people involved
- using published books and other resources that explain how families like yours are created.

Parents say ...

Starting the conversation

Our first discussions with Ethan occurred when he was about three years old. We just basically told him about Kelly, our surrogate, and how she's important to our family and that she is part of our family and that he grew inside her.

Rodney

My daughter knows that you have an egg and a sperm and the doctor puts them together in a dish and then puts an egg back into mummy – and she's four. I guess it's more the terminology and the process I want to get right before I say, 'A very generous man deposited sperm and that's how you came about'. That will come when she's a bit older and able to grasp that concept better. **Helga**

It just started naturally coming into conversation when he was about three years old. We just told him, 'You've got two dads,' and then we would expand on that naturally as it came up. **Jason**

We've talked about it very openly and very honestly right from when they were babies. The first time we actually sat down with them in any kind of formalised way was probably when Harry was about three. The initial conversation was about how our family came to be – how you need an egg and a sperm – and because he had two mums, we needed to use a donor. **Camille**

I think we've just always talked about it. It was really important to me, because I'm adopted, and I asked my mum, 'When did you tell me?' And she said, 'When you were old enough to ask me,' which, I think, was when I was about four. I can't even remember exactly when we told our kids. They have just always known.

Kate

I would say it's never too early to do it and in my experience kids just stop listening and walk away when they're getting more information than they need. They just kind of tune out and they tell you by their behaviour. When Xavier had had enough, he just changed the topic. **Susan**

Jenny's two and we've had lots of conversations already. Up here in the hills, heterosexual families are everywhere and there aren't so many other types of families. We told her a special person donated his sperm so that we could create her and that she is part of our family and that we love her. From day dot we have basically been telling her about how she was conceived. **Karla**

I think I want him to know before he remembers knowing, if that makes sense. So I want to keep the conversation going, particularly given that a baby is coming and there is an opportunity for that. **Joanna**

How to tell

I think you need to be honest from the very get-go, so as soon as they start asking questions, tell them the truth. Say, 'Mum and mum or dad and dad ...' – or whatever the family make-up is – '... really, really wanted a baby and this was the way we could do it'. **Maryann**

We explained that some people have a mum and a dad and that the dad is the source of the sperm, but in our case we had a donor who was the source of the sperm, and then a nice doctor assisted with the process to create them. **Jacki**

When you feel they are starting to learn about different things, you read a storybook about our type of family, or catch up with some friends with a similar family situation. **Jason**

I think it's important to be transparent, straightforward and age-appropriate. **Brad**

The important thing for us is to own the experience and always be proud of it, because we just know if we don't show pride in what we did, he won't have pride in where he came from.

We have to reflect what we want him to take away from the whole process. **Rodney**

I'd say, take a chill pill, because we work it up to be such a big drama in our heads whereas, in their little minds, it's not such a drama if they feel safe and secure with who they are and their environment.

I just told Stella from the very beginning, so it wasn't going to be this big earth-shattering discussion that came out of the blue. It was just a part of everyday conversation in a very informal way. **Helga**

I think it comes down to how relaxed or how anxious you are about describing it and I know that with my daughter – I'm actually in a wheelchair and none of her friends' parents are – and I've said to her, 'You know, everybody is different and mummy is different'. So she knows being different isn't a bad thing. **Helga**

I think that kids drive this conversation by their questions, but you also don't want to give them too much information, so I think you need to be guided by them. **Maria**

He's not that interested in the mechanics yet; he's interested in football. So, what we've been doing is introducing the concept of the people involved and how they relate to us, and how we describe them as part of our extended family. **Rodney**

Recently, a friend was asking how they should respond when their child said, 'If Brad likes boys how did Jake come about?' And another friend chipped in, 'You just say, "The doctor helped"'. I thought, well that's not a bad answer at this point in time. Later on, you can go into more detail. **Brad**

At the moment we just say, 'A very nice man donated something, a part of him that we needed to make you'. When she's older, we will say, 'A very nice man donated his sperm and this is what we know about him'. **Eil**

Books and resources

We managed to find a book that talked about how two mums get a donor and it was exactly our story. So we started using that book and he really loved it, and from there, questions came up. **Camille**

I have been making a book for him since before he was born. We've got everything in there from the donor profile, the photos of our first appointment, his birth, his naming day ceremony and his first birthday party. He always wants to look at the pictures and if I go too quickly he wants to turn back. **Pia**

We created an electronic photo book of all the people involved in the journey – the surrogate and the egg donor. It shows who those people are, with names and dates. It's been really useful, especially because young kids respond to the visual, so it's easy to pull up a photo of our surrogate and her family and talk about how her family was created and how they helped us create ours.

Rodney

For me, using books was really helpful in explaining her situation. She knows she's got two mummies and other people have something else and if she ever seems confused about it, then we read her one of the books and it definitely helps. **Eli**

Thoughts and suggestions

We have always tried to be as ethical and considered as we can. I would say, for anything to do with children, honesty is important. If I give my son facts, simple facts, he will ask when he wants more information and then I will answer those questions. Try to be honest, factual, keep it simple but respond when they ask questions. Don't try to sweep it under the carpet and don't say, 'I'll tell you later'. **Pia**

It's more than just telling him a story about how he came into existence. It's teaching him about tolerance and acceptance of other people's families as well, because he does know that other people have two mums or a mum and a dad. So, it's really about getting that context: that there's a variety of families and his is just one of them. **Rodney**

It's outing yourself in public appropriately, without any shame or embarrassment, that's really important, I think, so you are setting the tone. **Jason**

Over the years, we've introduced more information about how Daddy Rodney and Daddy Jeff wanted to have a family, but we couldn't have a baby by ourselves, because only women can carry babies. So we had to find a woman who would carry a baby for us, and we met Aunty Kelly, and she was a really wonderful person and she helped us. **Rodney**

We'd spoken to lots of friends and we'd had lots of discussions with people we knew who had older children.

Camille

I don't have any concerns about having that discussion with Jake, only because I anticipate taking a very factual approach.

Brad



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Researched and written by Jacqui Tomlins.

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