

Contact stories: Donors



What is it like to be contacted by somebody conceived from your donation? How could it happen? If you decide to meet up, what will you do together and how might it feel? Are there any challenges that might come up?

Whilst everyone's circumstances are different, it can be helpful to hear about others' experiences of contact.

Here, we share four stories from sperm donors who took part in the [ConnecteDNA research study](#). These donors were all originally anonymous donors. Donors who donated after anonymity was lifted in 2005 are automatically identity release and some issues they will encounter may be the same, but some may be different.

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





Mickey

Mickey donated sperm in the early 1990s. At the time, he was in his early twenties, recently graduated and unemployed. A friend suggested that he donate sperm to earn some extra money (they were then paid £7/donation). He was accepted onto the programme and donated for a year, getting to know the staff and taking an interest in the process of screening and freezing. He was told that the process was ‘fully anonymous’ and, at the time, he was happy with that.

However, after he finished donating, Mickey quite quickly started to think about the children that had been born from his donations – he assumed there were ten because he had been told he’d reached ‘the limit’. He trained as a social worker, then got married and had two children of his own. His wife knew that he had been a donor, as did various friends. From time to time, he wondered how old his donor children might be in relation to his own children and clients but never thought he could do anything about finding them.



When Mickey saw an advert for 23andMe on the TV, he briefly considered the implications for him as a donor but did not register. Then, in the early 2020s, around 30 years after he had first donated, a cousin who now lived abroad approached him out of the blue. She asked if he had ever donated sperm and explained that a donor conceived person called Sarah had been in touch with her, via 23andMe, looking to trace her donor. She suggested Mickey take the same test to check if he was this woman's donor. He did so without hesitation.

The test took several weeks but eventually confirmed that Mickey was indeed Sarah's genetic father. The pair have since been in touch regularly, progressing gradually from email conversations to whatsapp and video calls, before meeting in real life. Mickey has met Sarah's wife and daughter (who is also donor conceived). And through Sarah, Mickey has been in touch with two others conceived from his donations, all of whom have always known they are donor conceived.

When I asked what it was like to be matched with these people, Mickey described what sounded like a feeling of fate, that this was meant to happen at this time in his life. He had recently been through a divorce and felt ready for a new chapter in his life. It is clear that he really values these new relationships and has really enjoyed getting to know his donor children who he thinks of as ‘his’ and part of his family. He is particularly close to Sarah. He really enjoys finding out about traits they have in common and resemblances they share. He loves that he has a ‘granddaughter’ now in Sarah’s child and his own Mum also loves that she is a great grandparent and would like to meet them.

A more challenging aspect of contact for Mickey has been that his two children, now in their teenage years, do not know. Whilst for him, his recent divorce made the timing of contact fortuitous, he did not imagine that it would be such good timing for them. He was mindful of the emotional impact the divorce had taken, particularly on his youngest daughter and worried that she could feel excluded or rejected by Sarah’s (and the others’) new role in his life. However, as the relationship with Sarah looks likely to be lasting and significant, he feels it is important that his children do know and he is planning to find a way to tell them in the near future.



Rob

Rob donated sperm whilst at university in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He had been recruited by a friend and several of his other friends had also donated. He described how they saw being a donor as a win-win situation – they earned a small amount of money (which meant a lot to them as students) and they were able to help people who couldn't otherwise have children. Rob said that he would never have donated had it not been anonymous and his friends felt similarly. Sometimes they joked, 'imagine if all the children one day came knocking on our doors!'

Around twenty years later, Rob, now a father himself, decided to make himself contactable via the HFEA and also registered with the Donor Conceived Register (DCR) - a service which uses DNA testing to match pre-1991 donors, donor conceived people and donor siblings who register with them (since he donated both before and after 1991, he is eligible for both registers). What brought about this change in outlook?



In Rob's case, there was not a single turning point but a gradual development of empathy and understanding for donor conceived people and a recognition that they may be curious about him. He explained how curiosity could torture you if you couldn't find answers. He too was curious about them but was clear that this was not 'torturous' in the same way.

Initially when he took the DCR test, he made no matches – something of a relief at the time. Then, several years later, he was contacted via the HFEA to tell him that a donor conceived person had requested his details. This person contacted him via email, with a request for any medical information and explaining there is also a sister (also conceived via his donations) and both of them live abroad. The family has stayed in touch (via email) but most of their communication goes through the mother because she speaks English more fluently than her children.

A second donor conceived person contacted him the following year, again via the HFEA, and this person asked specifically if he knew about any donor siblings. Rob had

already been thinking about taking a commercial DNA test but this question prompted him to buy a 23andMe test whilst on offer. The results of his test produced matches with three further donor conceived people, one of whom did not know of her conception prior to taking the test. He has since found out that she has two siblings (also conceived via his donation) but they did not yet know they are donor conceived. In total, Rob now knows about eight people conceived from his donations.

Rob has stayed in touch with those donor offspring who know about him via email and occasional zoom calls. He explained that it was 'scientifically' fascinating to see the resemblances (both physical and personality traits) between himself and the people that have been born from his donations, and these constitute the main topic of conversation. However, he also talked about being quite passive in his relationships with them. He described not wanting to ask too many questions of them but making it clear he

was available to answer any questions they might have for him. Rob is also very conscious of treating everyone equally and fairly, for example by inviting all of the donor siblings if he arranges a zoom call.

Rob has his own daughter, now a young adult, and he has, since being contacted, told her about his donations. The news was initially a shock to her, particularly the idea that she is 'not exactly an only child' any more, but Rob feels that she has now adjusted to his new role.

One further challenge that has arisen for Rob is that one of his donor conceived offspring, born prior to 1991 and living abroad, wants to move to the UK. She has suggested that perhaps she could claim him as her legal father in order to facilitate this. Rob was not comfortable with this and has tried to discourage her. However, he finds the situation awkward and this has made him reluctant to organise a zoom call for a while.

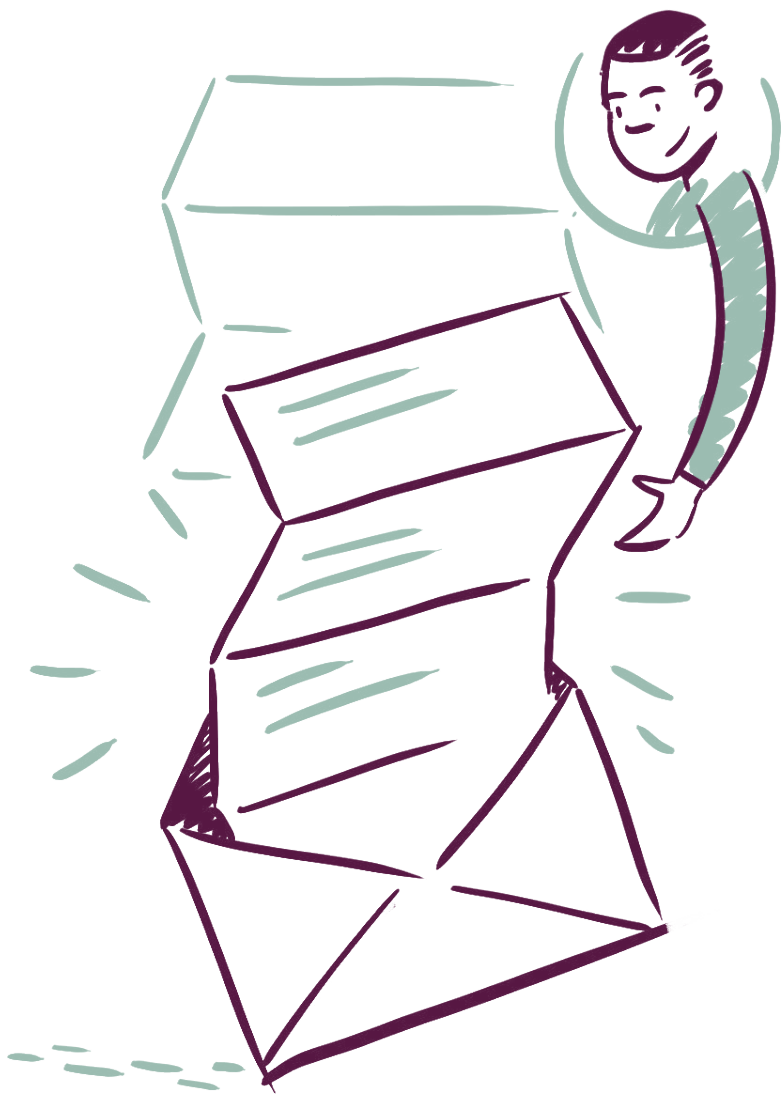


Will

Will was a sperm donor in the late 1980s. He registered with a local NHS clinic after his then girlfriend suggested it might be 'a nice thing to do'. It seemed to him like a progressive thing to do - to help people, including same sex couples, have a family.

Will does not remember being offered any counselling. It was, however, made very clear to him by clinic staff, that his donations were anonymous and he would never be able to find out about the recipient families. Will continued to donate once a week for about 6 months. He believes there are at least two but probably closer to ten families he has helped to have children.

Will was never embarrassed about being a donor - all of his friends know he has donated. However, he did not, and has not, told his family. He imagined they would find it difficult to understand and that his parents would want to meet the children who had been born, particularly since neither he nor



his brothers and sisters have had any biological children themselves. His wife, on the other hand, has known since the early days of their relationship that he was a sperm donor. They developed an ongoing joke between them that one day his donor children would contact him, never imagining that could actually happen.

Shortly after his own father's death, Will received an official-looking letter. Inside were two letters. One was a message from a 'search angel' explaining that she was trying to track down her client's sperm donor and had identified Will as this person. If Will did not reply, the letter went on, she would contact his siblings as the next most likely candidates. Will interpreted this line as a threat. The accompanying much shorter letter struck a rather different, more apologetic, tone. This was from Lisa, his genetic daughter, apologising for the disruption and asking whether he would be willing to answer some of her questions.

Initially, Will felt threatened by the letter which put him under pressure at a time when he was still grieving for his father. At the same time, he did also feel a sense of duty to Lisa, feeling as if he should respond to her letter. He was, and is still, unclear about exactly how they found him but assumes that one of his relatives, perhaps even his late father, had registered with a commercial DNA testing website. Will preferred to do things via the 'official' routes and contacted the HFEA who directed him to the DCR. He was subsequently offered counselling and a DNA test which confirmed the match with Lisa. The DCR also offered mediated contact which both Lisa and he accepted.

Despite his initial concerns about how he was contacted, Will now has a tentative relationship with Lisa. After going through a process of mediated emails and then a supervised phone call, they now exchange occasional emails and have met once (about 6 months ago) and may meet again in a few months. Will said that their

meeting was a bit awkward at first but they talked for a couple of hours about what they have done in their lives and respective families. However, afterwards he reflected that they have little in common and is not sure if the genetic link is enough basis for an ongoing relationship. At the same time, he feels honour bound to follow her lead.

Will has shared each step of this journey with his wife, although they always used to joke about this scenario, in practice, she has found this news difficult to manage. Will felt that it had probably brought up unresolved issues relating to not having her own children. He said it was something they were working through and he was always open with her about what was happening but there were times she had found it difficult to talk about.

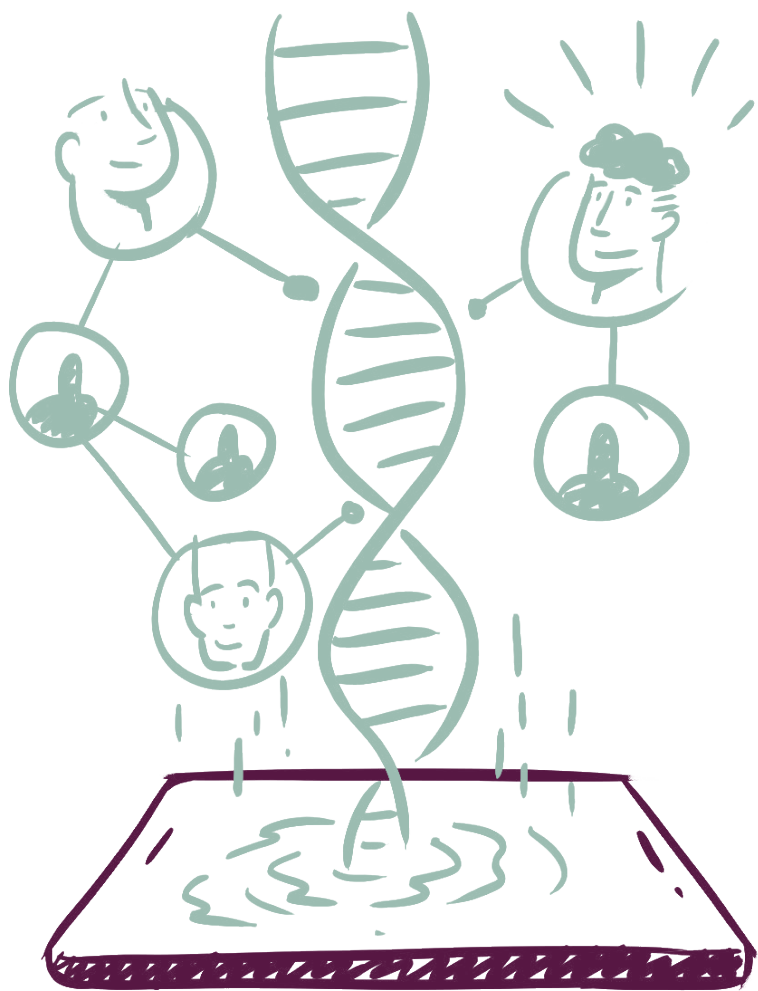


Ben

Ben was in his twenties when his friend suggested he become a sperm donor at a local clinic. It was the late 1970s and he described the arrangements as ‘very informal’, a brief chat about his medical history and some basic health tests. He never questioned that the donations were anonymous; he knew the lengths that his recipients would be going through to have a baby and this, he felt, would ensure they had a good life. Ben believes between 200 and 300 people may have been conceived from his donations.

Life continued and Ben became a husband and a father to three children. He rarely thought about his donations.

His outlook changed dramatically when he read a newspaper article in the early 2000s, written by a donor conceived person. The author explained that they were searching for their donor in order to find out about a missing part of their genetic history and not because they wanted ‘another



Dad'. This was the first time Ben had considered the possibility that someone conceived from his donations would want to meet him. It seemed 'such a simple thing' which could so easily be granted that it led him to sign up to UK Donor Link (now the Donor Conceived Register) - a service which uses DNA testing to match pre-1991 donors, donor conceived people and donor siblings who register with them. No 'matches' resulted but, through UK Donor Link, he has become part of a community of people around donor conception and gained an insight into the experiences of donor conceived people.

Being part of this community meant he was one of the first to learn about the availability of commercial DNA testing and its implications for finding genetic relatives. Dismissing some others' concerns about data sharing and privacy, he signed up with the two biggest companies and then uploaded his results to several other platforms. He felt a responsibility to 'put himself out there' on these sites so that any donor conceived person who was looking for him would be able to find him.

After several years, he received a message from a man, Leo, who, according to Ancestry's algorithms, was his son. Leo assumed that Ben must have had a relationship with his mother. Ben was shocked. He had assumed that anyone who found him this way would already know they were donor conceived. He certainly hadn't anticipated having to break this news to anyone. He explained that he had been a sperm donor and this most likely explained their genetic relationship. Leo was relieved. He had been wondering how he would manage the news of his mother's infidelity.

Ben asked Leo if he had any questions for him. He did and so they moved their communications onto email to discuss Ben's medical history, and any shared traits they might have. After emailing for a period, the two decided to meet. They met

up a few times (sometimes with their partners). Ben described himself as 'responsive' in this relationship and said that this could potentially lead to a 'stalemate' as no one wanted to ask too much of the other.

Some time later, Ben discovered a new genetic match - Justin. He was a similar age to Leo and again clearly did not know he was donor conceived. Ben tried a similar approach and also offered to put the two men in touch with one another. However, at this suggestion, Justin deleted his profile from Ancestry and Ben has not heard from him since. Ben felt this had to be the donor conceived person's decision and he implied the door was open for contact in the future.

Ben's family have always known he was a sperm donor. It had never been an issue and had even become something of a family joke. However, for his children (all adults), things have changed now that there are real people involved and Ben senses they have some reservations, perhaps even feel threatened by Leo's appearance. Leo hopes to meet them one day but none have yet agreed and he is respectful of their views. Despite these challenges, Ben feels a responsibility to maintain his profile on the DNA databases and make himself available to future donor conceived people who may wish to contact him. He is mindful that if he is not registered then he will could still be traced via other members of his family and he does not feel it is right to place this burden on his relatives.



The development of this resource was funded by an UKRI ESRC Impact Accelerator Award (University of Manchester).

The resource was developed in 2022-2023 by a team of professionals across a number of organisations: Joanne Adams, Nina Barnsley, Laura Bridgens, Meenakshi Choudhary, Helen Clarke, Roy Davis, Debbie Evans, Lucy Frith, Leah Gilman, Debbie Howe, Jackson Kirkman-Brown, Patricia Lambert, Charles Lister, Kevin McEleny, Petra Nordqvist, Angela Pericleous-Smith, Caroline Spencer, Caroline Redhead and Wayne Vessey.

Illustrations and design by James Huyton of Burograph Ltd.

