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A friend, a father, or both?

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Commenting on the recent article in BioNews, which reported that half of women would ask a friend to father their child if they had no partner (1), I wish to raise the following points for consideration.

The Vitabiotics survey this was based on reported that over half of the women surveyed were worried about not finding 'Mr Right' in time and would consider asking a friend to father their child, with women in the age group 28-31 more likely to consider this option (2). A further emerging trend was that women would choose alternative methods of conceiving in the absence of a suitable partner (2, 3). For many women, a treatment such as donor insemination (DI) is usually a last resort. However, it appears that at least in some instances it is being seen as the first resort (3). But what implications, if any, do the results of this survey have for the UK population?

The fact that women are thinking about their fertility at a younger age is a positive trend. However, the numbers of women who would consider asking a friend to father their child does raise some concerns.

Friendships are not static entities, they sometimes break down; therefore to change a friendship into a relationship that includes children has the potential to cause many problems. Arguably this may be no different to the issues faced in a long term relationship; there are however, subtle differences.

Usually women seeking DI would gain access to donor sperm via a licensed treatment centre. They then have the assurance that the sperm has been thoroughly screened in accordance with HFEA guidelines (4). In the absence of such screening there is the possibility that genetic/hereditary conditions may be passed on, particularly since friends do not always tell each other everything. This may lead to important medical issues being overlooked due to the absence of routine screening, an issue which again may be applicable to long-term relationships.

Women also need to think about what they would tell a child should a birth take place. Considerations should include; how the child's paternity is explained, and what role - if any - the friend will play - will he be a father by name only, a 'hands on dad' or just a friend of the family?

The child should be informed, at an age when they can understand, about the facts of their

biological parentage; openness about their genetic heritage is to be favoured and encouraged, and it is in the best interest of the child. It is also much easier if they are told at an early age, rather than finding out by chance (5), particularly if the friend's details are recorded on the birth certificate.

By law men who donate sperm via a licensed centre are not regarded as a legal parent (6). However, men donating informally may in some circumstances be regarded as the legal parent (7). This could mean that the friend may be obliged by law to have his details recorded on the child's birth certificate - a failure to do so may result in a fine for both parties (8) - and may also impose a legal obligation on him to contribute financially towards the upbringing of the child (9). It may therefore be beneficial to set clearly defined parameters prior to the birth regarding the friend's role in the child's life, including what contact he might have, this should also consider the future.

The fact that the friend is single at the time does not mean he will be single forever. This means that any potential family he may have in the future would need informing that he is already a parent. Any child(ren) born from this new union would need to be told that they have half-sibling(s). Indeed the half-siblings may have an interest in getting to know one another; this openness may prevent the development of a consanguineous relationship later in life.

My suggestion is that women who might consider asking a friend to father their child, should think carefully about the possible ramifications before proceeding. What appears to be, at first, a simple solution, may not actually be as straightforward as anticipated.

SOURCES & REFERENCES

1) [Katy Sinclair, 'Half of women would ask a friend to father their child'](#)

BioNews | *22 September 2008*

2) [David Rose, 'Half of women would ask man friend to father child'](#)

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3) [Viv Groskop, 'I wanted a child more than a man'](#)

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4) [Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority Code of Practice \(7th ed., 2007\)](#)

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5) [Vasanti Jadva, Tabitha Freeman, Wendy Kramer and Susan Golombok, 'Age of disclosure and donor offspring's feelings about finding out they were donor conceived' \(2008\)](#)

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6) [Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 S 28\(6\)](#)

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7) [HFEA, 'Donating sperm, eggs or embryos' \(2007\)](#)

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8) Department for Work and Pensions 'Joint birth registration: recording responsibility' (2008) Cmd 7293

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9) Under the provisions of the Child Support Act 1991

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