

A Pearl of a Family

Talking about
donor conception
background with
a child in a two-
parent family

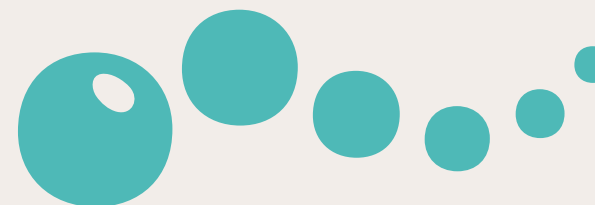


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Printing location: KTMP 2023
2nd print
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Thank you to the families of donor-conceived children for sharing their stories.
Please refer to the source when quoting the text.

This guide was compiled by the Helminauha project (Pearl project, 2019–2021) and it offers information and support to people who plan to use donated gametes or have used them to conceive a child.

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For the reader

This A Pearl of a Family guide by the Pearl project is intended for parents in two-parent families who have one or more children through donor conception, but also people wishing to use donated gametes to conceive a child or pregnant through donor treatments can use this guide to prepare themselves for talking about the donor conception background with their child. You can use the guide when you consider your own approach to how to talk with your child about their donor conception background, and you can read the story in the guide together with the child. This story can be complemented with additions, texts and photographs that best suit the conception story of your family.

The texts in this guide are a 'by-product' of the family coaching developed by the Pearl project for families that have conceived children with the help of donated gametes. The parents that have told us the conception story of their own family and how they have talked about it as a family have brought a sense of real life to the guide. The stories were collected through an anonymous form in summer 2021. We are thankful for all the stories received as well as all the encounters we have had through family coaching, supported holidays, family meetings and other project activities.

The guide includes a short family story, quotes from stories told by parents, information on how to talk about the donor conception background with a child at their different age levels, some terms related to conception through donated gametes, and empty pages for your own notes and children's comments. At the end of the guide, we have shared some tips for describing the story of your family.

As donor conception families, you are part of a group of diverse families all connected by conception with the help of donated gametes. You will always be welcome in our Pearl network!

Pearl project, Simpuukka ry

Tip for using this guide

You are holding a guide that offers you information on how to talk about donor conception background with a child conceived using donated gametes. We hope that this guide will help you find a way for your family to talk to and with the child about their important background and about how your family came to be with the help of donated gametes.

Revisit the story in the guide, the tips for how to talk to the child at different age levels, the checklist and your own notes from time to time. Your family's way of talking about your child's donor conception background can evolve and change as your child grows.

There are a few empty pages at the end of this guide, reserved for your own notes and the child's comments. You can write down any thoughts and feelings that may come up when reading this guide.

If you wish:

You can make your own additions and changes to the story, adding your own way of talking about the child's background, using the words used in your family and telling how you prepared for the child's arrival.

You can attach photos, images or stickers to the guide or draw images that suit your family's story.

Note down comments from both the child and the adult when reading the story.

Remember to record the dates so you can see what your child thinks about their background at different ages!



A pearl of a family – a story of a two- parent family



Ilo: Tell me again how our family was born! How was I born? **Sävy:** We hoped for a child for a long time and were very eager to have you.

Lumo: Some parents can have a child easier than others. We needed a doctor's help so that you could start growing in mummy's tummy.

Ilo: How could the doctor help you? And what happened at the doctor?

Lumo: The doctor told us that we needed some sperms from another person, because we didn't have any of our own. To grow a child in a mother's tummy, sperms are needed from a man and an egg from a woman. We didn't have the sperms, but luckily we could get them as a gift from a donor.

Ilo: What if you didn't have an egg, either?

Sävy: That's a great question, sweetheart! There are also people who donate those.

Lumo: And it is also possible to be gifted an embryo that has both donated eggs and sperms.



Ilo: How did I then start growing in mummy's tummy?

Sävy: The doctor put together the donated sperms and my egg. Together, they formed an embryo that was placed inside mummy's tummy to grow.

Lumo: You grew up in the tummy for nine months. That felt like a long time because we really wanted to hold you in our arms.

Sävy: We talked to you while you were growing inside mummy's tummy. We always told you how much we loved you and how eager we were to meet you.

Lumo: The day you were born, we got the best present in the whole world that we had wished for so much.

Sävy: You still look like you have something on your mind. Would you like to ask something else?

Ilo: Nope, I was just thinking that we are a Pearl of a family!

Lumo: That we are, a real, shining pearl. That's such a nice thing to say!

Ilo: Okay, bye, I'm going outside to play!



Stories told by parents on how their family have talked about the child's donor conception background

These stories have been collected from parents with donor-conceived children with an anonymous form during spring 2021.

"We said that the girl seeds were ordered from Denmark and they arrived by a plane. Then a doctor planted them in the mummy's tummy to grow. We have ordered some flower seeds from abroad, anyway, so why not baby seeds, too :). The girl doesn't really think there's anything strange about it. Apparently, they have spoken about different kinds of families at the day care centre, as the girl keeps saying "not all children's mothers and fathers are married, some children only have a mother, not everyone has a brother" and similar things. Regarding the reason for why we ordered the seeds from Denmark, we have told that we wanted to have such a great girl, you!"

"We have said that mummy's own baby seeds are broken, so some lovely woman gave us baby seeds that the doctor put inside mummy's tummy to grow. We have also said that baby seeds are needed from both a woman and a man. We said that mummy and daddy wanted to have a child together very very much and had hoped for the child for a long time."

"We have said that there was something wrong with mummy's eggs, which is why we had eggs donated by someone that a doctor put inside mummy's tummy. We have talked about eggs and sperms, baby seeds from both a male and a female. We have also said that the donor is a genetic parent."

"Often, when we are going to bed at night, I tell the following story: Mummy and daddy wanted a child of their own very, very much and tried and tried, but a child did not come. Then we found a doctor called Sanna who said that she could help us. And Sanna gave us some medicine and did everything she could, but still a child did not come. Then, Doctor Sanna found a nice woman who said that she could give some of her baby eggs to mummy. And Sanna put an egg inside mummy's tummy and then you started growing! First you were teeny-tiny and then you grew bigger and bigger (I use my fingers to show the growth). Then you kicked inside mummy's tummy and I wondered who you would turn out to be. Then we went to a hospital and a doctor helped you out. And it was you, the world's most wonderful boy! Mummy is thankful for the nice woman that donated the baby eggs and helped us have you. And for Doctor Sanna, too, for her help."

"Do you remember when I told you that daddy didn't have seeds, so some kind man donated them to us and then you started growing in my tummy. – I have said that the father did not have his own seeds/sperm and that we needed help from a doctor and a man who donated some seeds/sperm to us. Later on, the children asked where the doctor put the seeds and I explained that a doctor put them inside mummy's private parts with a syringe and I also explained what the 'standard' way is."



"We have talked about the child's donor conception background ever since the child was little, always in an age-appropriate way. First, we told a story that the mothers wanted a child but needed 'baby seeds' for this. An unknown man had given some of his seed for the clinic to use, and the doctor helped to bring those together with mummy's 'seed'. And this seed started to turn into a baby inside mummy. Later, when the child has grown older, we have repeatedly talked about the topic, using the correct terms: donor, sperm, egg, conception."

Talking to a child about their donor conception background

In donor conception families, the questions related to the child's origin and handing them are present for the child's whole life, emerging at different developmental stages based on the child's ability to understand them. It is important that the child has the space to express all their emotions related to their family composition and the donor conception background. Only the child can decide whether the information related to their genetic background is important to them; no one can decide this for the child. This is why a child is entitled to be aware of their own background. When talking to the child about their donor conception background, it is essential that the child is allowed to grow into this information for their entire life. This means that a child should not remember the first time they are told about the matter, but it should be something they have 'always' known.

Checklist

A child should be allowed to grow into the information of their background for their entire life

- You can start talking about this matter already when the child is a baby or a toddler. This way you can practise the use of words and way of speaking that suits you the best.
- Speaking to a baby does not come naturally to everyone, but the earlier you start the easier it is.
- The older the child you are speaking to is, the better prepared you should be to the situation, as the child gains more understanding about matters as they grow.
- Awareness of one's own origin is important for the development of whole identity.

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The parent is responsible for bringing the matter up

- The parent bears the responsibility for making the child aware of their donor conception background. Having accurate information is respectful to the child. Please always remember to speak truthfully to your child.
- The child may not always be able to ask questions about their conception, and the parent cannot just wait for the child to bring up their donor conception background.
- Proceeding at the child's pace is the key part. It is important to seize the moment when it comes and react to the child's initiatives.

The website of the Pearl project, www.helminauha.info, has tips for books and materials to support you in how to talk to your child about their donor conception background, as well as tips on how to approach the matter in an age-appropriate manner.



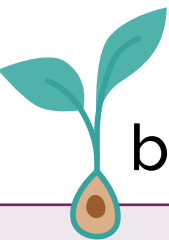
Trust in your own way of talking about the matter – there is no one right approach

- Use the words and terms that feel natural to you. The words you use are not important – the way you use them is.
- In two-parent families, the parents can also have different ways of talking about the donor conception background.
- Boldly seize the moments where you can bring the topic up naturally, such as the child's questions related to babies and birth. A child does not consider matters related to human bodies awkward.
- Make use of various practical methods, such as fairy tale or picture books, materials related to early childhood sexuality education, playing, baby books, photographs or drawing.


Take a time-out if needed

- You do not need to have answers ready to the child's questions; an adult is also allowed to think about how to answer. Parents are not walking, talking answer machines.
- The child's questions and thoughts may bring up different emotions for the parent, too, and processing these can take some time. It is essential that you do not ignore or disregard the child's question but promise to come back to it later: "That's a good question, would it be alright to talk about it more in the evening?"
- Always come back to the matter. As the child grows, their understanding of the matter changes and evolves, which is why it is important to revisit the topic.

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Talking to a child about their donor conception background at different ages



0–1-year-old child

Development targets:

Unconditional closeness and attachment with the parent caring for the child.

Needs in relation to the parent:

Be mine! Need for safety, warmth and nourishment.

- All interactions with a small child are important. You can use your words and touch to tell your child how important, loved and wonderful they are and how long you wanted and hoped to have them.
- You can look at picture books about a baby growing inside the mother with the child. You can tell them about baby seeds and say that a baby's home is in its mother's tummy.

A parent can practice finding the suitable words and a natural approach to the topic with a small child without the need to prepare for difficult questions.

2–3-year-old child

Development targets: Safety and progress by exploring the world a suitable distance away from the parent. Defiance and personal will are developing.

Needs in relation to the parent:

I want to show my own will! The child tests the parent: will you set safe boundaries even if I defy you and show you my will.

- The child starts to understand the differences between sexes and also starts to ask questions about where babies come from. You can talk about the topic to the child when they bring it up or whenever the topic comes up naturally. It is important to answer the child's question without adding your own interpretations to it.
- You can continue to tell the child their conception story, telling them that a baby starts growing from a baby seed, grows inside the tummy/womb and then comes out through the mother's private parts. Finding the right words that feel natural to the parent will make these conversations easier.

4–5-year-old child

Development targets: Developing communication, emotional regulation and understanding of one's separate personality.

Needs in relation to the parent: The child wants answers to endless questions about the world and life, wants to be admired.

- The child is curious and interested in the origin of babies and gender differences. The basic rule is to answer the child's question as simply as possible.
- You can tell the child that a baby grows from a baby seed in the mother's tummy. The seed can find its way in the tummy in several ways. Making love is the way some grown-ups show love to each other and make babies together. Babies can also be had through adoption, fertility treatments or donated gametes.
- The child is already able to ask questions about where they come from and talk about their donor conception background without fully understanding its meaning: "Who gave you the seed? Can you get more of them?"
- The child is an active participant and able to talk about their background and the donor, as long as the parents have started talking about it quite early on. At this stage, the parent should consider when the story is the child's story and when the parent's. How can you talk about your story without violating the child's ownership to their own story?



6–12-year-old child

Development targets: Meaning of friendships grows, the child is looking for peer experiences. They want to be their own person and also exist on their own.

Needs in relation to the parent: Needs privacy, but also the parent's presence.

- At school age, children become aware of differences. Feelings of shame and envy are expressed in different ways and are quite common; the child's self-esteem may suffer. The child may hope that their donor conception background is kept quiet or secret.
- The ability for logical thinking is growing and the child starts to understand that a gamete donor/donors is/are part of the family's story.
- The child will have a more realistic view of their donor conception background. They may start to think what it means to the child themselves and to others. The parent must understand that it is natural for a child to be curious about their origin.
- Listening to the child and answering their questions about birth, conception or intercourse, for example, in an age-appropriate manner are the key. Creating an open and safe atmosphere is important.

Adolescence

Development targets: Separation from parents, emotional upheaval, building one's own identity and values. The child still wants their parent to see them as 'small'.

Needs in relation to the parent: Needs adult guidance and support, but also wants to try things on their own and learn through mistakes.

- Ability for abstract thinking and understanding of their own genetic background deepen.
- The teen complements their own conception story and makes their donor conception background part of the rest of their identity so that it takes a suitable place in life.
- The ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others grows stronger and the teenager's understanding for the choices of their parent(s) is more realistic and empathetic.
- Development of identity may refer to acquiring information or creating a connection to one's genetic background. Some ignore the matter, some only think about it and some proceed to take concrete steps.
- Sometimes, there is no information available of the young person's background. The young person may feel that part of them is kept in the dark. In such cases, the young person needs support from their parent and should not be left alone to cope with the matter.

Know your terms

Sperm	A male gamete received from a man, a 'baby seed'.
Egg	A female gamete received from a woman, a 'baby seed'.
Embryo	An embryo is born when a sperm and an egg unite, i.e. when the sperm fertilises the egg. The embryo is called a foetus when eight weeks have passed since the conception. An embryo is a complete baby seed from which a baby starts growing in the mother's womb.
Womb	A foetus develops from a fertilised egg in a womb. A placenta grows in the wall of the womb, providing the foetus with nutrients and oxygen. The womb is a baby's home where they grow, making their mother's stomach round.
Donor	Donors donate their own gametes, i.e. sperms or eggs or embryos, to people who need them.
Donor role	A donor has no rights or obligations to the child conceived with the help of the donated gametes.
Act on Assisted Fertility Treatments	In 2007, the Act on Assisted Fertility Treatments came into force in Finland, securing the rights of a child conceived in Finland through donated gametes to know their background. This law determines how fertility treatments are granted in Finland.
Luoteri	Luoteri is a fertility treatment register that records the data of egg and sperm donors. When a child conceived with the help of donated gametes turns 18, they have the right to access the data of their donor, i.e. their name and personal identity code, in Luoteri, using the donor code. The child will receive the donor code from the clinic where the fertility treatment was provided. The Luoteri register is maintained by Valvira, the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health.

Diverse families with children

A family with a mother and a father	A family that has a mother and a father. The family can include one or more children.
A rainbow family	Rainbow families are families where one or more parents are part of a sexual or gender minority. There are many different kinds of rainbow families. You can read more about rainbow families at sateenkaariperheet.fi
A family with two mothers	A family where a female couple coparent a child or children. The most common form of a rainbow family.
A solo parent family	A family with one parent who has conceived a child or children with the help of donated gametes.
Adoptive family	The family consists of a parent or parents who have adopted one or more children from their home country or from abroad. The family can also have children conceived in other ways. All the children in the family are just as much part of the family and the parents are just as real parents to all the children.
Foster family	The family consists of a parent or parents that have children placed into their care through Child Welfare's support measures. The family can also have children conceived in other ways. The foster parents of a foster family take care of all the matters part of the child's life. A foster family can be the child's only family or the child can also have contact with their biological parents. All the children in the family are just as much part of the family and the parents are just as real parents to all the children.
Reconstituted family	In a reconstituted family, the parents have not made all the children together.

Information, support, activities!

OUR WEBSITE
WWW.HELMINAUHA.INFO
HAS A WIDE RANGE OF INFORMATION
FOR CONCEIVING CHILDREN WITH
THE HELP OF DONATED GAMETES
AND THE SUPPORT AND
ACTIVITIES AVAILABLE.