

Gay father surrogacy families: relationships with surrogates and egg donors and parental disclosure of children's origins

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Objective: To study the nature and quality of relationships between gay father families and their surrogates and egg donors and parental disclosure of children's origins.

Design: Cross-sectional study.

Setting: Family homes.

Patient(s): Parents in 40 gay father families with 3–9-year-old children born through surrogacy.

Intervention(s): Administration of a semistructured interview.

Main Outcome Measure(s): Relationships between parents, children, surrogates, and egg donors and parental disclosure of children's origins were examined using a semistructured interview.

Result(s): The majority of fathers were content with the level of contact they had with the surrogate, with those who were discontent wanting more contact. Fathers were more likely to maintain relationships with surrogates than egg donors, and almost all families had started the process of talking to their children about their origins, with the level of detail and children's understanding increasing with the age of the child.

Conclusion(s): In gay father surrogacy families with young children, relationships between parents, children, surrogates, and egg donors are generally positive. (Fertil Steril® 2016; ■: ■–■. Copyright ©2016 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Inc. on behalf of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Key Words: Children, disclosure, egg donor, gay father, surrogacy

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In the United States it has been estimated that between 2 and 3.7 million children have a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender parent, with approximately 200,000 being raised by same-sex couples (1). Given

recent changes in marriage equality in the United States (2) and physicians' ethical obligation to treat all persons equally regardless of sexual orientation (3), the number of gay fathers creating families through assisted

reproductive technologies is likely to rise.

Gay men may choose to become parents via surrogacy, a process in which a woman bears a child for the intended parent(s). This can be a relatively low-technology procedure in which conception occurs using the sperm of one of the intended fathers and the egg of the surrogate who carries the child to term (referred to as genetic surrogacy). However, the most common type of surrogacy in the United States is gestational surrogacy (4), a high-technology procedure in which an embryo is created using the sperm

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of one of the intended fathers and the egg of a donor and transferred to the surrogate. The surrogate who carries the pregnancy to term and gives birth has no genetic connection to the child.

Concerns have been expressed regarding the relationship between families created through surrogacy and the surrogate over time (5). Although contact with the surrogate may be beneficial in helping children understand their origins, there have been fears that ongoing contact with the surrogate may undermine the relationship between the parents and the child. These concerns have typically been raised in relation to heterosexual parents, specifically mothers, as opposed to fathers in gay father families.

Studies of surrogacy families conducted in the United Kingdom, where commercial surrogacy is illegal, have found that heterosexual parents can and do form positive relationships with surrogates during pregnancy, which typically continue as the child grows up (6, 7). However, the amount of contact between children and their surrogate has been found to lessen over time, particularly in the case of previously unknown genetic surrogates (6).

A small body of research has examined the relationship between gay fathers and their surrogates in Spain, Italy, and the United States (8–10) both during and immediately after the birth of the child. Relationships between fathers and surrogates have generally been found to be positive, with contact being maintained through occasional emails and/or the exchange of postcards and photographs at birthdays and holidays. When contact between gay fathers and surrogates has been found to cease entirely, this has occurred in the Indian context (11), in which socioeconomic and language barriers, as well as agency policies, do not encourage or facilitate contact between parties (12).

In gestational surrogacy arrangements, parents may select an egg donor with whom they can have contact in the future (an open-identity donor) or a donor with whom they will have no contact (an anonymous donor), although the possibility of achieving anonymity is increasingly in doubt (13). A relationship between the child and the egg donor may be viewed by intended parents as threatening, given that genetic relatedness is often given primacy in family relationships (14). Even where there is no relationship between the child and the donor or surrogate, it has been argued that these “birth others” (15) may have a place in the child’s family tree (16). Despite the fact that 18,400 infants were born in the United States through gestational surrogacy between 1999 and 2013 (4), the nature of the relationship between children in these families and their egg donor is unknown.

Gay fathers who started their families using surrogacy need to explain their path to parenthood to their children. In surrogacy families headed by heterosexual couples, almost all parents are open with their children about their use of a surrogate (6, 17). This openness is unsurprising, given that the parents have to explain the arrival of the baby to family and friends in the absence of a pregnancy. A high level of openness is likewise to be expected in gay father families given the absence of a partner of the opposite-sex with whom to procreate. However, the specific

aspects of the surrogacy process that gay fathers choose to disclose to their children, and at what age they choose to do, have not been studied. When children in the United Kingdom longitudinal study of surrogacy families headed by heterosexual couples were 10 years old (6), 58% of parents with a genetic surrogate had told their children about the surrogate but had not mentioned the fact that the surrogate’s egg had been used in their conception. This partial disclosure suggests that the use of a surrogate in the gestation and birth of a child may be easier to disclose to young children than is the use of donor eggs. In addition to explaining the role of the surrogate and the egg donor, gay couples may or may not tell their children which father has a genetic connection to the child.

Relationships between fathers and surrogates have been found to be positive both during and immediately after the birth of the child. However, little is known about how relationships with both surrogates and egg donors change over time as children develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of their birth, or how and when fathers talk about surrogacy with their children. Therefore the present study examined three questions in a sample of gay father families with 3–9-year-old children born through surrogacy: [1] Do gay fathers and their children have contact with their surrogates and egg donors? [2] What kind of relationships do gay fathers and their children have with their surrogates and egg donors? [3] What have parents explained to their children about their surrogacy origins?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample

Forty gay father families created through surrogacy participated in the study, all of whom resided in the United States. The inclusion criteria for participation were that the target child was aged between 3 and 9 years and the parents had been a couple since the time of the child’s birth.

Families were recruited through the use of multiple strategies. First, surrogacy agencies that specialized in working with gay men sent information about the study to the fathers in their mailing list ($n = 18$, 45%); second, participants passed on information about the study to their friends, colleagues, or acquaintances who fit the study criteria and/or disseminated information about the study through social media ($n = 7$, 17.5%); and third, families were recruited at events at which gay fathers were in attendance ($n = 15$, 37.5%).

There were 24 boys (60%) and 16 girls (40%) in the sample, with an average age of 5 years 8 months (SD 2.2 years). The mean age of the fathers was 47.29 years (SD 6.20 years). The mean annual family income was \$370,000 (SD \$168,264). Most fathers were white ($n = 67$, 84%), with the remaining fathers identifying as Latino/Hispanic ($n = 7$, 9%), Asian ($n = 1$, 1%), or “other” ($n = 5$, 6%). Ninety-eight percent of fathers had a bachelor’s or higher degree. Most families lived in the Northeast (67.5%; New York City = 24, Massachusetts = 3), with the remaining families living in the South (7.5%; Florida = 1, Virginia = 1, Texas = 1), the West (22.5%; California = 7, Oregon = 1, Washington = 1), and the Midwest (2.5%; Minnesota = 1).

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