



The **TIP-TOP** Program

BY LISA SCHUMAN, LCSW



THE CENTER
FOR FAMILY
BUILDING

THE FACE OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY IS CHANGING

The number of women having children over the age of thirty five is on the rise, single parenthood is no longer unusual, and same sex couples having children has become commonplace. As a result, more and more families are having non-genetically linked children.

For generations, adoption was the only avenue for creating these families. In the past few decades, however, assisted reproduction has expanded the options for family building. This has been a wonderful gift for many, but for some, it may be difficult to let go of the wish of having a child that is genetically related.

On your journey to parenthood, feelings about being childless and about coping with non-genetic parenthood may be intertwined. It may have felt impossible to separate these two feelings. If you have struggled with infertility, you may also be feeling some lingering upset about the emotional and financial toll that the treatment has cost you and your loved ones. You may

also feel a sense of loss over not having the opportunity to fulfill the dream of having a genetically related child, and emotionally drained from the treatments and losses.

Now, you are a parent. The sadness about being childless is behind you. The fertility treatment is also behind you. Yet, sadness about not having a genetically linked child may still exist. Those feelings are personal, legitimate and don't detract from the love you have for your child. It is important to understand and work through those feelings. These experiences are part of the fabric of your life. Now your child will need to cope with his feelings about being a product of egg or sperm donation.

There will be, and may have already been times when you wish you and your child were genetically linked. You and your child just want to be the same as everyone else. Perhaps you feel embarrassed to tell other people. Maybe you wonder which people to tell. Should you tell your relatives, friends, your child's teacher or pediatrician? Will people see you and your child as "different" and will you feel alone?



You and your child just want to be the same as everyone else. Perhaps you feel embarrassed to tell other people. Maybe you wonder which people to tell. Should you tell your relatives, friends, your child's teacher or pediatrician? Will people see you and your child as "different" and will you feel alone?

It is never too early or late to help prepare your child to cope with these disclosure concerns. Doing so will not only help your child be prepared for something with which he will need to cope all of his life, but may help you stay connected to each other.

The Tip-Top program will help your child cope in a world where gamete donation is still often a foreign concept. Just as adoption has become more mainstream in the past fifty years, gamete donation will likely become more common too. For the moment, however, this technology is only addressed occasionally in the mainstream media. Although ovum donation has been in existence since 1984, and sperm donation has been around for more than one hundred years, gamete donation continues to be a mystery to many. Yet, it is a reality for your child.

Parents worry about how their children will receive information about their origins. They worry how their children will be seen by others and sometimes, they worry that their children will love them less if they help their child explore their feelings about their genetic history. In families for whom using donor gametes was not a result of infertility, such as LBGT or single individuals, disclosure is often less problematic. However, with all families using assistive reproductive technology, there are concerns about their children and how they will receive and use the information in the outside world.



LET'S BEGIN BY ADDRESSING YOUR CHILD'S FEELINGS

The feelings that arise about being a child conceived by sperm or ovum donation can be as different as the children themselves. It is also important to note that your child may have feelings that are very different from you and your partner. You may share the dream of having the same genetics, you may share curiosities about the donor, you may wonder about your child's genetically related siblings and have uncertainties about disclosure to others. Or your feelings may be different from each other. There are many ways you can share common feelings such as wishing you had the same eye color, but it is also important to remember that your child is a separate person and she needs you to be curious about her feelings and empathic about her concerns.

When the donor is known, your child will have the advantage of putting a face to his genetic make-up. Yet, that does not necessarily mean it's easier. Having a known donor comes with its own challenges.

You are your child's parent. That is true without question. Your child will know, however, that part of him is connected to someone else out there in the world. It is not possible to predict whether your child will feel that part of him is two or eighty percent of his genetic make up. So although we cannot know how much significance the donor will carry for the child, we know the donor will carry some weight in the child's mind. As a result, feeling good about the donor will be important to your child's self esteem. Therefore, the donor should be spoken about in a positive light.

There may be times when you fear your child may think of their donor as a parent. In fact, when your child is a teen she may try to convince you of this. Remember, it is a teen's job to find ways to separate from you and often children do this by being hurtful. Do not fall into the trap of thinking that your child no longer loves you. You are her parent for the rest of your life and your child may need to be reminded of

this many times. These reminders are stabilizing and reassuring to a child of any age.

Parents may be concerned about how their children will feel about being conceived with the assistance of egg or sperm donation and children may worry about how their parents feel about them being a product of egg or sperm donation. It is common for parents and children alike to have many thoughts about donor issues. Talking to children about their origins can promote closeness and alleviate anxiety.

Your child's temperament will contribute to their decisions to disclose to others. Just like adults, they may want to shout it from the rooftops, or have a strong desire for privacy. Part one of the **TIP-TOP** program will provide a way to assess this.

Although a child's temperament may remain consistent for an extended period of time it may also change as they go through different life stages, so it is important to continue to talk to your child about the **TIP-TOP** skills at various times in their life. Your child may think nothing of it at ten, think it's "dumb" at fourteen and become interested in it at age sixteen.

It is possible that your child may under or over-estimate her feelings and share too much, or regret not sharing more. Like most experiences in childhood relationships, this is part of growth and another opportunity for children to understand themselves.

If you implement this program, you are dropping a seed into rich soil. During various points in your child's development, your child will take to it or not. But even when he doesn't, you are educating him, encouraging your child to feel good about who he is and keeping the door open for more communication in the future.

Your timing may not always be perfect, and it's important to be respectful of your child's need for space and privacy. Simply offering the opportunity to discuss donor related issues will communicate your openness



and love. It will demonstrate that you are not intimidated or threatened by the donor.

Embrace the way your family was built. Some families have two moms, some have one dad, some have one child and others have ten. Your family is beautiful the way it is. There will be times when the issue of the donor arises, and perhaps you feel that using gamete donation makes your family different. It's okay if you struggle with your personal feelings about using a donor. This is your personal issue to resolve on your own, and it may take some time. It does not mean you love your child any less.

As a parent, we perform many functions. We care for and educate our children in ways that are obvious, and

in ways that are not so obvious. We teach our children to brush their teeth and tie their shoelaces, but we also teach them by our family traditions, habits, and ways we deal with the world. The **TIP-TOP** program will help you to help your children by teaching them how to manage their donor information in a way that works for them.

The **TIP-TOP** program is taught by direct instruction and by assisting the child in self-exploration. The program also has the benefit of placing you as your child's ally. As their support system in this process you can help them feel confident in their search to better understand their personalities and their genetic information.



STRATEGIES

You love your child and want to help him, and that is why you are interested in **TIP-TOP**. So once you have digested positive ways to talk about your child's origins, we can begin to look at the following steps:

First, we will give your child the opportunity to interact with children who share similar stories. Having this support can be powerful to your child, so if you are unable to attend a **TIP-TOP** workshop, search for other ways your child can connect with other donor conceived children,

Second, she will be given a feelings vocabulary. Even older children often cannot identify their feelings. Therefore, your children will begin to learn that they may feel a lump in their throat when they are sad, their hearts may race when they are excited or their bodies may feel relaxed when they feel warmly towards a friend or family member.

Once your child understands her feelings, the third step will be to help her understand her temperament. Does she like to talk about their feelings or does she prefer to keep her innermost feelings private? Is your child curious, and asks questions about things she doesn't understand, or does she take life as it comes without anticipating too much? You can simply reflect back to her what you see, such as, "I love how you share your feelings so openly", or "I can see how you like to share your feelings with special friends like Amy, it's great that you feel so close to her".

Positive donor language is a prerequisite. Language communicates intention and feeling. It is important to remember that your donor gave you a "gift." He or she is not the parent and should be referred to by name or by the word "donor." The donor will not parent your child. Your donor's generosity, however, helped to build your family and this should be celebrated. You also participated in creating this child, if not by carrying a pregnancy or providing DNA, by your efforts. This can't be forgotten.

Fourth, your children will learn the strategy we use to help them put this all together. This technique will help them assess situations they will be faced with throughout their lives. We call it **The Rules We Hold DEAR**, which are:

Deep Breath

Emotion Check

Audience Check

Response Choice

Fifth, we will give them the six response options they can use. These are our **TIP TOP** choices:

Turn Away

To politely leave the conversation when they are uncomfortable or something hurtful is said

Interested

They may want to know more about the situation or questions posed to them

Protect My Privacy

They can say: "That is private"

Teach The Facts

They may want to educate the listener

Opinion

They may want to share their opinion of egg or sperm donation

Personal Story

They may want to share their personal story

Lastly, we practice these steps so that they will not feel foreign when our children are faced with situations where they have the choice to disclose information about their genetic histories.

You can begin to use this model to help your child deal with the outside world and to foster conversation between family members. It is important to listen and honor our child's perception, even when it is not similar to our own. Your donor information is your child's information to share or not to share. They need to know that you are empowering them to make choices that are right for them, and that it is okay if those perspectives change over time. Your children will continue to grow and explore their stories over time and they will want you by their side.