

## Daddy Was Only a Donor

A new study paints a troubling portrait of children conceived by single mothers who chose insemination.

By W. BRADFORD WILCOX

In "The Switch," coming later this summer, Jennifer Aniston plays an attractive 40-year-old professional who has given up on finding Mr. Right for marriage and decides instead to move straight on to motherhood with a donor father. The movie offers a largely celebratory treatment of donor insemination, as do two other movies out this year, "The Back-up Plan" and next month's "The Kids Are All Right." Indeed, one of the bottom-line conclusions these movies are pushing is that the children turn out "all right" with donor dads.



Barbara Kelley

Hollywood is not the only industry peddling the story line that flesh-and-blood fathers are an optional accessory in today's families. Plenty of academics—from New York University sociologist Judith Stacey to Cornell psychologist Peggy Drexler—also have been arguing that mothers can do just as well raising children with donor fathers as they can with real ones.

In her book, "Raising Boys Without Men," for instance, Ms. Drexler claims that "maverick moms," including single women who rely on donor insemination, are just as successful raising boys as mothers who opt for the older model of marriage and motherhood. All that is needed for parental success, according to Ms. Drexler, is a "caring and supportive" model of mothering.

Until recently, there was one primary challenge to the intellectually fashionable view that fathers are fungible. It came from scholarship showing that children did better—e.g., were much more likely to finish school, avoid teen pregnancy and stay out of prison—in intact, married families than in homes headed by a single parent, most of whom are women.

Yet scholars such as Ms. Drexler were able to retort that much of the research relies on a comparison of middle-class married families with poor single mothers, so that differences in how children fare might be largely the result of socioeconomic differences. In their view, middle-class women who have a decent income and a good education can do just as good a job as a middle-class married mother and father.

That view ran into some major trouble this month, with the release of the report, "My Daddy's Name is Donor," by the Commission on Parenthood's Future (of which I am a member). The report is the first study to compare a large random sample of 485 young adults (18-45) conceived through donor insemination to 563 young adults conceived the old-fashioned way.

Significantly, the single women who chose to have a child by donor insemination were better-educated and slightly better off than the parents who had biological children together. So the study's results cannot be dismissed on the grounds that affluent marrieds were being compared to poor single mothers.

The study, which was co-authored by Elizabeth Marquardt, Norval Glenn and Karen Clark, paints a troubling portrait of the children conceived by single mothers who chose donor insemination. Young adults with maverick moms and donor dads report a sense of confusion, loss and distress about their origins and identity, and about their inability to relate to their biological father and to his kin.

Seventy-one percent of the adult offspring of these single mothers agree that: "My sperm donor is half of who I am," and 78% wonder "what my sperm donor's family is like." Half report that they "feel sad" when they see "friends with their biological fathers and mothers." Donor offspring with single mothers also are much less likely to report that they can rely on their family. Fifty-six percent of these offspring said they depend more on friends than on family, compared to just 29% of young adults born to two biological parents.

The study's findings echo recent commentary from young adults conceived through donor insemination. Writing in the Washington Post a few years ago, Katrina Clark reported that she envied friends who had both a mother and a father. "That was when the emptiness came over me. I realized that I am, in a sense, a freak. I really, truly would never have a dad. I finally understood what it meant to be donor-conceived, and I hated it."

In the U.K., Tom Ellis recently decided to try to find his donor dad through a registry that attempts to connect children to their biological fathers. Without him, he told a reporter, "I will never feel whole."

Such a sense of loss may help explain why the study found that adult offspring of single-mothers-by-choice were 177% more likely to report having had trouble with drugs and alcohol than children born to two biological parents. Perhaps in part because they did not enjoy the love, discipline and example of a flesh-and-blood father, young adults conceived through donor insemination to a single mother were also 146% more likely to report having been "in trouble with the law" before age 25.

So, despite the latest propaganda in favor of a father-optional future, this study suggests two stubborn truths: Children long to know and be known by their biological fathers, and they are much more likely to thrive when they have their own father in their lives.

On this Father's Day, men who have managed to be good flesh-and-blood fathers to their children should take some satisfaction from the findings found in "My Daddy's Name is Donor." Even if the Big Screen portrays them as superfluous, in the real world, their kids are much more likely to turn out "all right" than kids who only know their daddy as Donor.

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