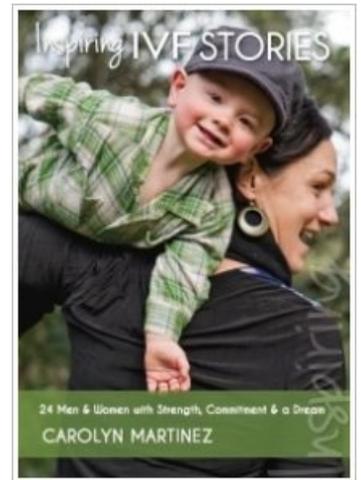


Our Donor Baby

A disturbing story made national headlines in April of this year. Natalie Parker is an embryo donor who claims that the woman to whom she'd donated her embryos had a baby, after telling Parker that she miscarried.

It would seem Parker's embryo recipient wanted the baby, but not Parker in the baby's life. Parker's story resulted in calls for greater legislation regarding embryo donation in Australia.



I've mulled for some time as to whether to write a blog about this topic. I am the very grateful mother to a donor embryo baby.

To clarify for those who are not totally up to speed with the term 'donated embryo' – this means that both the sperm and egg are from another couple, unlike egg donation. Embryo donation means that both the egg *and* sperm are donated. Donated embryos usually result when a couple who needed to have IVF to fall pregnant have completed their own family, but still have viable, frozen embryos in storage. Such couples have to decide whether to destroy the embryos, donate them to research, or donate them to an infertile couple.

Parker's story dismayed me for the future of the baby, for the donor, and for the many infertile couples out there for whom this story might make donation even more difficult if it puts off possible donors. My husband and I have done adoption and foster training, as well as education around donor embryo babies, and we are firmly of the belief that it is important

for any human being to own their full biology. That means that any child born from embryo donation needs to know their origins, and I believe, have contact with the donor family if and when they desire.

Our daughter is one and a half and I already talk to her about her donor family. We involve our donors in our life, and we always will, because that is what is best for our daughter. Not only that, we care about our donors and their wellbeing too. I would be devastated if I donated embryos to someone and then never heard from them again. It would make me worry whether or not any resulting children were happy as they matured. I would never put our donors in that position. We are so incredibly grateful to them; we want to be as kind to them as they were to us. We get a lot of joy out of sharing and celebrating this beautiful little girl with them.

Embryo donation is relatively new. Because it's in its infancy, there is little data to tell us how adults conceived through donated embryos feel about their beginnings. Research on adoption has largely informed my beliefs. I see a good relationship with my daughter's donor family as a must-have, not merely a nice-to-have, because one day it might be critically important to her psyche that she be able to meet and converse with them.

Our experience with our donor family has been extraordinary and wonderful. I asked our donor Mum if she'd like to contribute to this blog and she was keen as mustard, as, like me, she wanted to encourage others considering embryo donation. I asked the questions that I felt would interest potential donors and recipients. Her answers are frank and honest, and reinforce my belief that embryo donation is a wonderful and complex gift in which those involved all need to care for and respect all the dynamics and multifaceted feelings that arise for all parties. Someone wise once said, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' My daughter has the most amazing village supporting her.

When you first started IVF did it factor into your thinking that you might have leftover embryos and what you'd do with them if you did?

'Before we started IVF I was already thinking about what we may do with unused embryos. On my second IVF cycle we got many embryos.'

What made you decide to donate your embryos?

'We were happy with having two children, a girl then a boy. Possibly if we had two children of the same sex we may have tried for another, but who knows. For us our family was complete. My main reason for donating our embryos was that I felt like I owed the remaining embryos a chance at life. I also love the idea that we have helped another couple fulfill their dreams for a child. Having done IVF and been faced with the possibility of not having children, I knew what it felt like and for those of us that desperately want to have children it is a need that can't be replaced by anything else.'

Were you and your husband always on the same page in regards to everything to do with embryo donation?

'We hadn't talked about it in great detail and my husband hadn't given it the depth of thought that I had. It came up as a serious discussion as we made the decision to stop at two children. It seemed pointless to keep on paying for storage fees so we had the discussion and decided to help an infertile couple.'

Did you involve your children or extended family in the decision to donate?

'No. Our children were only 3 and 5 at the time so too young to be involved in any discussion about it. We have always been very open with our extended family about our embryo donation, however in regards to being part of the decision to donate or

not it was something my husband and I had to decide for ourselves.'

How did you choose to whom you donated your embryos?

'There wasn't much information out there when I was searching the internet but one name kept popping up through my searches. It was a woman who had been through many cycles of IVF and had written about her journey thus far. I connected with her unwavering determination to have a child. I would have been as determined myself and knew that she was the right fit for us. For us, I would not have liked an anonymous donation. It was important for me to get to know the people we would be donating our embryos to.'

When you chose to donate your embryos, what type of involvement, if any, were you hoping to have in the child's life?

'I was hoping to be given updates of how any child/children born were going and to see them grow, maybe meet them, but I knew that this was a gift that needed to have no strings attached. For me, it was always going to be more important for the parents of any children born from these embryos to be comfortable. This was and is important to me. It was an unconditional gift with the wellbeing and happiness of that family more important than my needs. I believe I would have been only thinking of myself if I put stipulations on the donor recipient family.'

Now that a child has been born, what type of involvement are you having in the child's life?

'We have been incredibly lucky that the family we donated our embryos to have been wonderful in keeping in contact. We get 3-monthly newsletters. They include photos and we LOVE getting them. My daughter and I, in particular, count down until our next one. We forward them on to our parents and siblings who love the quarterly updates. It has been made clear that we are

more than welcome to meet her and we will definitely take them up on that one day. It is meeting our expectations and more. The newsletters we receive have been a wonderful idea and we appreciate that we are very lucky to have such a wonderful relationship with the donor recipient family.'

Describe how the process of donation has been for you, your husband, your kids, and your extended family.

'Interesting is the first word that comes to mind. Rewarding is another. Our daughter loves the fact that she has a biological sister out there, my son is not as excited as he already has a sister. My husband is less likely to read the newsletters. I think he is worried he may want to drive up to get her (well that's probably an exaggeration but he doesn't want to feel that she is his daughter). It has been rewarding for me. The process of actually donating the embryos took a lot longer than I thought it would and I felt frustrated for our donor recipient family as I knew if it was me I would just want to get on with the transfers. Our extended family have found it interesting, I think because the further away the relation, the more it is similar to the relationship they have with our children. I don't think there have been any feelings of negativity; more like navigating new waters in this situation that is not something any of us have experienced before.'

Has your recipient family done anything that has particularly pleased or disappointed you?

'The newsletters we receive have been a lovely bonus that we weren't expecting. I can recommend to any potential recipients of donor embryos that this is a great way to involve your donor family if they wish to be a part of any resulting children's lives.'

Have you ever doubted your decision to donate?

'I can say with complete honesty that not once have I ever

regretted our decision to donate. The beautiful girl that has resulted in our donation has the most wonderful and loving family. How could we ever regret that?’

Can you describe how you feel about the little girl who was born from your embryos, and does your husband feel the same?

‘My feelings for her are complex, but I will try to describe them. I will never tire of hearing stories about her or seeing photos of her like I may if she were a niece. I don’t feel a desire or yearning for her to be with me. I sometimes have dreams of missing a child somewhere but don’t wake up feeling distressed, more reassured that she is with her parents. I look forward to having a relationship with her when she is older and hope that my children will also. I imagine her always being a part of our lives. I am mainly glad that she is alive. My husband is different. For him I think, at the moment at least, he would rather stay disconnected. He would never regret donating our embryos, and would definitely not ever refuse to meet her if she wished for that. He just is a different make-up to me. Her needs would always come first if it came to it.’

If someone asks you for advice on whether to donate, what guidance do you offer them?

‘I would, and have, urged people to at least consider donating their embryos.’

Has anyone negatively questioned your actions because you donated?

‘Yes. My most common negative comment to get from people (most who haven’t done IVF but quite a few who have) is ‘how could you give your child away?’ That has always struck me as a not well thought-out comment. I know I will offend some people but this is where I stand. If you consider your embryos as a group of cells with the potential to become a baby, then to donate your embryos to science or to destroy them is fine, but then

to donate them to someone else so that they can turn them into a baby is fine also isn't it? On the other hand if you consider these embryos as your children then how could you choose to destroy them? Surely you'd rather them grow up in a loving family other than your own if you can't look after them. Personally, I consider embryos a bunch a cells with the potential to be a life. But even if you did consider an embryo a child the argument for destroying it doesn't hold up. You can't have it both ways. Either they're you're children and you couldn't destroy them, or they're not, so why not give them to someone who needs them? I feel like most people don't give it the necessary thought because it is too hard and quite confronting. The most common worry I hear is that it would not be a good family that their biological child was born into and that they'd live a horrible life. The fact is that no-one else is going to raise their children in the same way you do. But let's face it, none of us are perfect parents. Let's also keep in mind that anyone looking at receiving an embryo donation is pretty determined to be a parent so unlikely to be an unloving parent. So my reaction is to be a bit annoyed and frustrated at people letting their own worries and selfishness or laziness get in the way of giving a couple the opportunity to be loving, sleep deprived, proud, beside themselves, doting and fiercely protective parents of their own.'

Have you received positive feedback because you donated?

'Yes. Many people say what a wonderful, selfless thing it is we've done. I always feel a bit embarrassed by it because my main driving force behind giving our embryos away was to give our embryos a chance to be, with the added bonus of giving a lovely gift to a couple desperate to have their own children.'

You donated 6 embryos. Did it personally affect you when the recipient miscarried four of these, and failed to fall pregnant with one? Did you feel let down – that you'd chosen the wrong recipient?

'I definitely didn't feel let down or ever think we'd chosen the wrong recipient. They had given each embryo a chance and that was all I wanted. I felt really sad for our donor family. I felt worried to a small degree that they would feel like they had been given dud embryos by us.'

Have you had any experiences during the donation process, or after, that you'd like to share with other/potential recipients and donors?

'It was unknown territory we were going into so we went in with no expectations only hopes that we may get the opportunity to watch her grow.

It's a hard thing to give advice to anyone about donating embryos. You are giving a potential life to someone else. I believe it's something you need to let go of and if you are lucky like we were to get a family that wants you to be a part of their lives, then great. I know that in raising my own children I do it the way I think is best. I wouldn't like to be beholden to anyone else or have stipulations put in place on what I could or couldn't do or what I should or shouldn't tell them. It is a learning time for the do's and don'ts on embryo donation. I do believe that children should have the right to know that they come from embryo donor origins and I believe the laws are in the process of changing to have this information included on resulting children's birth certificates.

It has been incredibly reassuring for us to be kept up-to-date on her life. I was prepared to deal with no contact if that had been her parents' wishes but I do believe I would have felt like she was lost somewhere out there. Being in contact means I know exactly where she is and don't worry about her at all as I can see she is living a wonderful life.

I haven't regretted our decision to donate our embryos for a second. Our decision has resulted in such a gorgeous little

girl being in the world.'

Carolyn Martinez is the author of '[Inspiring IVF Stories](#)' available as an ebook or hard copy. 'Inspiring IVF Stories' contains interviews with men and women around Australia and at various stages of IVF. The book discusses keeping your relationship healthy during a sometimes difficult process – IVF.