Talking About Donor Stuff

Being open about donor conception isn't just a single event. Ideally, it's an ongoing conversation in the family. To support those conversations, in addition to our *Telling and Talking* workshops and *Continuing the Conversation* workshops for parents, DCN offers an in-person group for children to talk about 'donor stuff'.

Talking About Donor Stuff is a half-day, in-person session, run by Dr Sharon Pettle and her team, for donor conceived children aged 9-13 (school years 5 to 8) and any non-donor conceived siblings in the same age bracket. It's an opportunity for them to meet other donor conceived children, have fun, ask questions and talk about 'donor stuff' in a relaxed, child-friendly space. We run them at the DC Network London conference and occasionally as separate stand alone events. Contact us events@dcnetwork.org or check the website www.dcnetwork.org for details of the next date.

Who attends the groups?

The groups are usually made up of 7-10 children aged 9-13, from a variety of backgrounds. Some may be in solo mum families, some in same-sex families and some in heterosexual couple families. They may have been conceived through sperm or egg donation, or both, or embryo donation, sometimes also with surrogacy. They may have donors who are totally anonymous (forever), unknown now but identifiable at 18yrs, or known personally to the child (a family member, for example).

They may have brothers and sisters or be only children. Sometimes they have brothers or sisters who are not donor conceived, might be fostered or adopted or who have different donors to them. Non-donor conceived siblings can also attend and are very welcome.

We generally offer two groups, one for younger children and those attending for the first time and one for older children or those who have attended before.

How do I register my child

To register, you will need to complete a questionnaire to provide us with information about your child and family. You will then book a session with Sharon Pettle, or one of her team, to talk through that questionnaire and ask any questions. This is a paid for session. After that conversation, you will mutually decide whether your child is ready to attend the group or not and we'll let you know when bookings will open and what to do next.

My child is outside the age range, can they attend?

If your child is just outside the age range and you think they would like to attend, contact Jo on events@dcnetwork.org or call us on 020 7278 2608.

What do I need to think about before registering?

The groups are often very mixed. There will be some children, particularly those with older siblings, who know a lot about how babies are made. Some may be very curious about their donor and/or half siblings and have therefore asked a LOT of questions. Other children may have far less knowledge and little curiosity.

Some children will have known donors or lots of information about their donors. Others will have no information and no possibility of finding out more. Some children may have had contact with half siblings or have information about them. Others may have no half siblings or no opportunity to find that information out. Some are aware of changes in the law in the UK. Families are different, situations are different and interest levels are different. Children's personalities are also different.

Because of this diversity, it's really important for parents to consider raising the following topics to prepare their children for the groups. Any topic might come up depending on the others in the group, and it's good to be prepared.

- Simple information about how babies are made (at least to the level that is in the Our Story books – you need a seed and an egg and a place to grow) – although be aware that children can get curious about how the seed gets there, if the doctor does not help!
- Information about the donor (even if there is hardly any – there may be other children attending the group who are in different circumstances)
- Half sibling information (even if there is none – again, other children may be in a different position)

Parents might want to consider getting a copy of *Archie Nolan: Family Detective* and either read it with their children, or read it and then pass it on to their children. The book is aimed at 9-12yrs olds and is written in a similar style to the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. It follows donor conceived twins and their friends as they explore what family means. It's a great conversation starter, and one way to introduce some of the topics that may come up in the groups.

What sorts of topics are covered?

Each group is different and follows topics brought up by the children attending. What tends to come up in the groups with younger children can be different to the groups with older children – or are talked about at a simpler level. Older children may be attending the group a second or third time.

The sorts of topics that CAN and usually do come up are:

- Why people might use a donor
- That donors can be totally anonymous with no agreement to share information or identifiable (perhaps when the child is 18) or someone personally known to the family
- What information might be available about the donor
- That there are different kinds of families – eg not having a dad (solo mum and lesbian families)
- Why people donate
- Donors donating to more than one family - there could be half siblings, or full siblings
- How babies are made in the more conventional way

As the children's conversations and contributions guide the content of the sessions, it's really important that families have raised these topics at home BEFORE attending. This ensures that children are not confronted with new information for the first time in the group, they know it's safe to talk about these topics at home and will hopefully feel confident in continuing the conversation with parents after the groups.

NOTE: if this feels daunting, you are not alone in feeling that way! We can help and support you with ideas about how to raise some of these topics so if this is your situation see the section 'what to do before registering' below and please do get in touch.

What topics are NOT covered?

The groups don't cover sex-education. The expectation is that parents will have given children some basic information about how babies are usually made, to the level that is in the DC Network *Our Story* books, i.e. that you need a seed and an egg and a warm tummy to grow the baby. We have noticed over time that children may know lots about IVF or donor conception, but not know how babies are created without any help.

Why might it be helpful for my child to attend?

We know how valuable they are - the feedback from the kids is great and they often attend more than once. They are unique opportunities for children to meet others conceived 'just like them' and talk about family and donor conception ('donor stuff') in a supported, open and relaxed space.

Parents have told us that they value the pre-group telephone calls and believe the groups have helped their children be more able to talk about DC with them, and their friends (if they choose to do so).

Will my child automatically get a place?

No, is the simple answer. After registering and completing the questionnaire, you will have a phone-call/Zoom with Sharon to discuss things in more detail. It may be that after that call you decide that it isn't quite the right time for your child to attend (perhaps you might want to wait a year). Or there may be another reason why it isn't suitable.

Why do I have to complete a questionnaire and speak to a member of the team?

The questionnaire is an important part of preparing for the group. Because of the diversity of families and situations the team need a lot of background information, plus time to speak to you personally. This enables them to get a good sense of the children and their individual needs and helps them organise who is in which group. There is usually a group for younger children coming for the first time, and another for older children or those attending again. There can be a lot of difference between these ages, and the questionnaire helps assess the best group for your child.

Do siblings and twins attend together?

Where possible, if we are able to run more than one group, we put siblings in different groups. This allows them to have an individual experience of the group and they can express their thoughts and feelings without a family member listening.

Can I sit in on the group?

Parents are not part of the group so it's not possible to sit in. They are unique opportunities for children to meet in a donor conception friendly, parent-free space that is safe and supportive. Parents are sent a summary of what happened in the group and what was discussed but this is anonymised, so no particular child is identified.

Can children attend more than once?

Yes absolutely! We encourage them to and lots do attend more than once.

I've got more questions, what should I do?

If you have any questions, please email Jo, events@dcnetwork.org.

What are the next steps if I want to register my child?

1. If you want to discuss any details or ask questions please phone or email events@dcnetwork.org 020 7278 2608.
2. If you'd like to register, please email Jo – events@dcnetwork.org
3. Jo will send you a link to the questionnaire.
4. Complete the questionnaire.
5. The questionnaire will go to Sharon or one of her team.
6. You will be sent a link to book a phone/Zoom session with Sharon or one of her team - this is a hugely valuable paid-for session, giving you the opportunity to talk to a professional about your child.
7. Once you've spoken to Sharon or one of her team, together you'll decide if it's the right time for your child to attend, if there are additional things you need to think about or discuss with your child or whether you feel it is better to wait.
8. You make a final decision about whether or not your child will attend.
9. If your child is going to attend, when the conference booking forms are sent out you will book them in and pay for the session.

What happens after the group?

Children complete a feedback form straight afterwards which helps us get an indication of what they thought at the time. Parents get a summary of what happened and what was discussed in the group a few weeks after. Parents may be asked to complete a survey to help us quantify their experience and any benefits. The anonymised surveys also enable us to present the value of the groups in funding applications and to help raise awareness and may be used for research.