



young  
adults  
study

**Young adulthood – typically the period between the ages of 18 and 30 – is the important stage of life between adolescence and adulthood. Psychologists have found that it is during this period that individuals attempt to answer the question “Who am I?” at the same time as they experience various transitions and milestones and explore different possibilities for the future in domains such as work and romantic relationships.**

How being donor conceived fits into this overall picture is the focus of the Young Adults Study, a research project at the University of Sussex that investigated the lived experiences and wellbeing of donor conceived young adults in the UK. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the project was designed in consultation with the national charitable network for donor conception families, Donor Conception Network.

The study, which took place between 2020–2024, involved a nationwide survey, in-depth interviews, and focus groups with young adults aged between 18–32 years who had been conceived through anonymous donation. With almost 100 participants in total, the study is the first systematic psychological investigation of the perspectives and experiences of donor conceived people at this stage of life.

The young adults in this research were experiencing lots of changes in this period of their lives. Several had recently finished university, some were entering the workplace for the first time, a few had recently got engaged or married – and all were experiencing the uncertainties of the coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath.

### **What does it mean to be donor conceived in young adulthood?**

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The young adults had learned they were donor conceived from between 3 weeks to 29 years before taking part in the study. Approximately half had been told by their parents in early childhood, often at an age they couldn't remember.



The other half learned this information later in childhood, into adolescence, or as adults. A notable proportion of young adults had been told or found out about their donor conception in their 20s – and a minority learned through their results on a commercial DNA test.

Whether they had been told as children or learned as adults, young adults expressed a range of perspectives and feelings about being donor conceived.

For some, being donor conceived was an interesting fact about themselves, but one they didn't think or talk about on a day-to-day basis. For others, being donor conceived, and in some cases part of a community of families through donor conception, was central to their identity and experiences.

*It just doesn't feel to me like that much of a big deal. (29-year-old man)*

*The most unique part of me is donor conception. (22-year-old woman)*

For several young adults, being donor conceived had become either less or more important at this stage in their lives. For others, being donor conceived was something they hadn't yet decided their feelings about.

### **How do young adults manage information about being donor conceived?**

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Young adults varied in how – and with whom – they discussed being donor conceived. For some, talking about being donor conceived was the same as talking about other aspects of family life or their identity, such as their religion, and they were generally happy to share this information with other people.

For others, the subject was much more personal or private. Some young adults felt unable to share the information with other people because their parents had asked them not to, or they worried about how their parents would feel, or how other people would react. This was especially true of some of the young adults who learned about being donor conceived in adulthood.

Other young adults felt relieved, and in some cases empowered, by sharing that they were donor conceived with someone else. Some had only recently begun to discuss the topic more openly.

*It was so liberating saying it out loud. (29-year-old woman)*

Mostly, young adults found that other people responded positively to this information; they were generally supportive and, in many cases, curious to learn more. Some young adults were frustrated by having to answer the same questions with different people, while others felt that other people's lack of understanding about donor conception led them to make unsupportive or unhelpful comments.

*They've said things like "he's still your dad, that shouldn't change anything", or "your parents really wanted you" ... I think people just don't know what to say. They don't want to diminish the integrity of the people who raised you, whereas they don't understand you can appreciate both. (24-year-old woman)*

For some young adults, these kinds of comments were more common during the teenage years, while for others, they were a feature of their current experiences.

### **Are young adults interested in their anonymous donor?**

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Young adults differed in how interested they were in the donor and in other people conceived through the same donor (often referred to as donor siblings). These differences were not determined by the age at which they had been told about their conception.

*I had a nice childhood. But that has nothing to do with knowing your DNA and your heritage, and who you are. (30-year-old woman)*

Young adults' interest in the donor and donor siblings ranged from no interest, to wanting more information, to wanting to meet up, to wanting to build some form of connection.

Overall, young adults mostly wanted to learn more about their genetic connections to learn more about themselves, and to see whether they had shared characteristics or traits. Some wanted to know more about the donor's life and his motivations for donation.

*It shouldn't be assumed that any donor conceived person necessarily wants a full-on relationship with their donor or their half-siblings. It's more that I'm just so curious. (21-year-old woman)*



Some young adults wanted to know more about the donor than about donor siblings. More often, the reverse was true. Some worried that finding out more about the donor might disrupt existing family relationships, or that they might learn something undesirable about the donor.

Young adults who were an only child often wanted to find donor siblings because they'd always wanted brothers or sisters. In general, these potential relationships were considered positively because it was anticipated that donor siblings would be similar in age and may be similarly interested in making contact.

The amount of non-identifying information young adults who had applied to the HFEA had received varied significantly.

*That information was like gold dust to me. (18-year-old woman)*

A minority of young adults were not interested in learning about any of their genetic connections.

All the young adults wanted more information about their medical history, and several wanted up-to-date medical information from the donor.

### **What are young adults' experiences of making connections?**

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At the time of the research, several young adults had contacted their donor siblings, and some had contacted their donor. Connections had been made mostly through commercial DNA testing.

Others made connections through the HFEA's central register of information, although knowledge of the HFEA and its services was overall low. Some young adults had chosen not to tell others about having made these connections, including their parents.

Experiences with the donor and donor siblings ranged from the very positive to the very negative. Making connections often led to new thoughts and questions.

*They've definitely got room in my life. But what does that look like?*  
(24-year-old woman)

*I can't imagine how to build a relationship. Maybe I'd like sending a Christmas card?* (22-year-old man)

*Are they anything to me?*  
(31-year-old man)

Making connections also led to new and sometimes challenging conversations and experiences with the various parties involved, including, for example, the parents or siblings of donor siblings.

Not everyone who had sought to find genetic connections had succeeded in doing so. A minority had been contacted by others conceived through the same donor without expecting, or desiring, contact.

*They are strangers to me. It isn't a rejection of them as individuals.*  
(29-year-old non-binary person)

### **What are the implications of being donor conceived for young adults' wellbeing?**

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Young adults who completed our nationwide survey were doing well overall. Yet when compared to a group of young adults in the same age range who were conceived without assistance, they scored significantly lower on measures of emotional wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, and satisfaction with life.

Donor conceived young adults also scored lower on a measure of mastery, which assessed the extent to which young adults felt in control of their personal circumstances and their future.

However, donor conceived young adults were no more likely to be confused about their identity, and no more likely to report poor quality family relationships, than those conceived without assistance. Identity confusion was related to wellbeing among both donor conceived young adults and those conceived without assistance.

Interestingly, young adults who reported more stigma about sharing their donor conceived status with others were more likely to have lower wellbeing scores. These findings are important because they present a different picture to what has been found in the few existing studies of wellbeing among donor conceived people in young adulthood. This is likely because of the study's different methodology and approach.



### **What are the conclusions and recommendations of the Young Adults Study?**

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The findings of this study make clear that there is no one experience of being donor conceived in young adulthood. This is something that many of the young adults who took part were also aware of.

Almost all of the young adults who took part in our focus groups agreed that specific resources and support should be offered to donor conceived people. This was irrespective of whether they personally wanted support at this time.

All the young adults who were asked about specialist counselling (i.e., counselling provided by those with training in and knowledge of issues relating to donor conception) felt that this should be available. A few clarified that this should be sensitively developed, to avoid the implicit suggestion that being donor conceived is problematic. This recommendation is supported by the findings relating to donor conceived young adults' wellbeing at this developmental stage.

All young adults felt that parents should share information about donor conception with their children.

Other recommendations ranged from public health campaigns encouraging donors to update their medical information and/or remove their anonymity, to greater dissemination of information for young people relating to legislation and how to request donor information, to the creation of more opportunities to connect with other donor conceived people.

*There's more that can be done than just a Facebook group.  
(21-year-old woman)*

*At a minimum, we should have more health information. I didn't get anything. (26-year-old woman)*

*If people have donor conceived kids, they probably should tell them as soon as they can. (29-year-old man)*

Given the findings relating to the extent to which donor conceived young adults considered themselves in control of their personal circumstances and their future, it is important that their views and recommendations for policy and practice are engaged with.

*Ultimately, that's all I want. To be recognised, to have an acknowledgement of my journey. That's what I think we all want.  
(30-year-old woman)*

Based on their experiences, some young adults also suggested that improvements to the management and release of donor information by the HFEA should be made.

All young adults felt that more information about hereditary conditions should be provided to them. Most young adults who were asked about the HFEA's recent recommendation to make donors identifiable from birth felt that legislation making donors identifiable at 18 was appropriate.

**Young adulthood is an important period in which, among those who are donor conceived, new reflections, experiences, and support needs can emerge. The findings of this research, and the recommendations of the many young adults who took part, suggest that there is more work to be done by policy makers and practitioners to support donor conceived people and their families at this stage in their lives.**

**Conversations that normalise donor conception, and telling children about donor conception, are important. Greater information sharing by (historical) donors, and the development of specific means of providing access to medical information, are also clearly important.**

**Our findings suggest that consultation that substantively and meaningfully engages young adults who are donor conceived in conversations about policy and practice is needed. In the meantime, the development of resources and specialist support, which hold space for the diverse experiences of being donor conceived in young adulthood, is strongly recommended.**



## **Further information about the Young Adults Study**

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The Young Adults Study was conducted between 2020–2024. It is a UK-based, multi-method, psychological research study. Most of the participants in the study were conceived through anonymous sperm donation to heterosexual couples.

For further information and for a copy of the open access publications relating to the study, please visit

**[www.youngadultsstudy.co.uk](http://www.youngadultsstudy.co.uk)**

## **We are sincerely grateful to the many donor conceived people who took part in our research.**

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