

Are the kids all right? Questions about donor conception: Questions about donor conception

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue



Mia Wasikowska and Josh Hutcherson in *The Kids Are All Right*.

The film *The Kids Are All Right* offers a bittersweet portrayal of changes that sweep through a family after two teenagers, the children of a lesbian couple, meet the sperm donor who is their biological father. The donor begins to win their hearts, and he is about to claim some kind of role in the family until he has an affair with one of their mothers.

Two moments in the film point to important questions about the nature of family. In one scene, the teenage daughter expresses her frustration at having to do everything "right." She is a straight-As, all around good kid, and she reveals that she has maintained this flawless image so that her mother can show the world her "perfect lesbian family." Those last three words are delivered with such vitriol that both mother and daughter are devastated by their implications. As the family has struggled to keep up appearances, they may have lost sight of unconditional love.

In the second incident, the sperm donor is kicked out of the house, with one of the mothers delivering this judgment: he is nothing but an "interloper" in their lives.

If we are to believe, as the film asks us to believe, that the kids *are* all right, then we also have to agree with this judgment. For the family to go on with the story that everything is all right, the sperm donor must be dismissed, and the unblemished image they have projected to the world will have to be restored. Yet some of the most endearing, funny and true moments in the film hint that the donor is not entirely an interloper. The relationships the children seek with him suggest that he has an important place in their lives.

In a *New York Times* review, Dennis Lim praises the film for showing that "it is not a contradiction for a film to be both out-and-proud and pro-family." But the family's wagon-circling at the end of the story points to a version of "traditional" that is not so comforting. This is a family that has no room for outsiders and no room for error. It is a closed family that functions only for itself and not for the rest of the world. That vision of being "pro-family" ought to be challenged by the imperatives to love our neighbors as ourselves and bear one another's burdens.

The release of *The Kids Are All Right* coincided with the release of a study on sperm donors by the Commission on Parenthood's Future. It concludes that people conceived through sperm donation want to know about their fathers. It also finds that these children are likely to encounter special hazards. The study, titled "My Daddy's Name Is Donor: A New Study of Young Adults Conceived through Sperm Donation," might have been titled "The Kids Aren't All Right."

Using questionnaires, the study compared the responses of people conceived through sperm donation with those of people adopted as infants or raised by biological parents. The research was conducted by Elizabeth Marquardt, an independent researcher associated with the Institute for American Values; Norval D. Glenn, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin; and Karen Clark, a donor conception advocate.

Marquardt says she wanted to hear from people conceived through sperm donation because reproductive technology is too often viewed only from the perspective of happy parents and cute babies. The children of sperm donation grow up, Marquardt reminds us, and "they have stories of their own." She wants to "open up a space in our cultural conversation for people to be able to tell their own stories, whatever

those stories might be, without people immediately shutting them down with 'you should be grateful to be alive.'"

According to the study, most children of sperm donors do not consider their unknown father to be incidental to their identities. Most agree with the statement, "My sperm donor is half of who I am," and they long to know more about this person for emotional, psychological and biological reasons. Some children of donors are disturbed that their conception involved a financial transaction, and they want to understand the circumstances of that transaction. They would like to know more about their genetic makeups for medical purposes or for emotional reasons.

People conceived by donor conception are uncommonly likely to donate their own sperm or to act as surrogate mothers (20 percent of donor offspring did so, compared to only 1 percent of those raised by their biological parents). Yet donor offspring are also more inclined to discourage a friend from using a sperm donor and are more likely to say it is morally unacceptable to accept a fee in exchange for the donation of sperm.

The study points to the "confusion, tension and loss" that may mark family relationships when children are conceived through sperm donation. Divorce and family upheavals are more common in the families of donor offspring than in those of adoptees and people raised by both biological parents. Furthermore, the children of donors worry about unknowingly becoming involved with someone who may be a biological relative.

The study suggests other "poor outcomes" for donor offspring, including higher occurrences of delinquency, substance abuse and depression. The use of the word *outcome*, however, is unfortunate. We do not know that these "outcomes" are caused by sperm donation. Correlation does not equal causation, as the saying goes. Still, the correlation is important to note.

Amy Laura Hall, an ethics professor at Duke Divinity School, worries that studies like this might promote "a rhetoric of shame." While Christians may have cause to "resist the gamete trade," it should not be because they believe that children of sperm donors "are uniquely marks of a technological-reproductive world gone awry." Hall notes that Christianity has not focused on questions of biological paternity. Jesus' followers are "marked, most distinctively, as children of a heavenly Father. All other marks of paternity are relative."

The questions involved in donor conception are deeply personal, and Christian perspective on the practice of donor conception, even with its attendant concerns, must insist that all children are precious children of God, made in God's image and loved by the Creator.

The Christian faith recognizes that bodies matter. In Jesus, God came in the flesh, in biological and genealogical reality. At the same time, the Christian faith offers the hope that genes are not the fullness of our story. God acts in scripture to make families in unexpected ways. The surprising child given to Mary and Joseph and the inclusion of the gentiles in God's plan show that our most important source of identity is in God.

The use of the words *donor* and *donation* is itself theologically significant. A donation, from the Latin *donum*, meaning gift, at its best mirrors some of the attributes of God's own gifts. The gifts of God are always good and freely given. It is no wonder that some donor offspring are concerned that the sperm donation was given in exchange for a fee. The gift of life, one of the primary gifts of God, is not offered in this way. We need to acknowledge a key difference between market exchanges and God's freely given gifts. Perhaps we ought to consider the study's call to end the practice of paying for the donation of sperm.

Another key issue raised is secrecy. The research findings make many recommendations about the secrecy around sperm donation. Offspring of donors often want access to information about their donors. In many countries, anonymity of donors has been done away with entirely.

Donor conception raises issues not just about "outcomes," but also about the intimate question of identity. Margot Starbuck, who wrote a memoir about searching for her biological father, told me that secrecy and lack of knowledge acted like a poison in her life.

As a young adult I longed for my birth father, with whom I did not have a relationship, to know me and respond to me. In my experience, knowing *about* him was no substitute for being known *by* him. In the most difficult season of my journey I suspected that my birth father's purposeful absence mirrored the spiritual reality of a disinterested heavenly father.

After a long time of struggle, Starbuck said, she came to a greater understanding of God in the Trinity.

The Father of Jesus was not, as I had suspected, a parent who sacrificed his child out of self-interest. Rather, altogether *for* me, this Father was the One who gave his own life out of love for me. It was the reality of God's self-giving love on the cross that finally equipped me to distinguish divine love from the human stuff.

If the kids—however they were conceived—are all right, it will not be because their families have learned how to appear perfect. It will be because they reflect the self-giving, freely flowing love of God.