



## **Lesbian Couples - Path to Parenthood**

By Michelle Hester, LCSW-C

An increasing number of lesbian couples are using reproductive technology to become parents. Not having suffered the heartache of infertility, many come to the process hopeful and thankful that there is a technology to help them achieve their dream of parenthood. For others the reality of needing to use a medical intervention to achieve this end is frustrating.

The social landscape for lesbian couples has, of course, changed dramatically in the last decade. In addition, the recent Supreme Court decision legalizing same sex marriage dramatically expanded legal rights and protections. However, bureaucratic hurdles remain. For example, at least in the near term, second parent adoptions are still the order of the day.

- [Learn more about LGBT Family Building Resources](#)

### **Deciding Who Will Carry the Pregnancy**

For some couples it is clear who will try to become pregnant. The decision is usually based on age, medical history and the depth of the desire to be pregnant and give birth. Sometimes the plan is for each to have a child, often with the older partner going first. A subset of women chooses to carry the other's egg so that they both have biological involvement.

The "other mother" has a challenging role with no established road map. For example, women will need to figure out how to answer the intrusive question of who is the "real" mother. For some women this can be a painful question, which can tie into a sense of loss or of being marginalized. Like the heterosexual father, this other mother may indeed feel a bit sidelined in the first part of parenthood when there is a focus on pregnancy, childbirth and possibly nursing. Couples will want to think about the many ways in which they can establish meaningful, mutually supportive roles. In addition they will want to think about how to handle the inevitable questions about their family make up. These are questions that children will also have to answer and they will look to their parents' example.

### **Choosing a Sperm Donor**

Some couples begin with the idea of using a known donor. If the relationship that both prospective mothers have with the intended donor is based on trust and good communication, this arrangement can have benefits for all involved, including the child. Many people worry that one or more of the parties- and this would ultimately include the child, -will, with time, want a new plan, which is not welcomed by the others.

For many, using an anonymous [sperm donor](#) seems simpler and in this stage of the process, it is. From the vantage point of a future offspring, the picture might look different. Couples often report that accessing the sperm bank for the first time is a surreal experience, leaving them with the initial impression that they can order a child to specification. This, of course, is not a possibility for any prospective parent.

In choosing a donor, couples find it useful to identify what is most important to them whether that be physical attributes, values, health history or interests. Interestingly people often find the donor's voice clip useful.

One of the many decisions that couples will need to make is whether they want to choose a donor who says that he is open to contact after a child reaches age 18. This, of course, is not a guarantee but a statement of intention. In the end, the most important variable in choosing a donor is that the parents have a positive regard for the donor because this gets communicated to children in many ways. Couples sometimes feel that if they are a loving, supportive family a child will not be interested in the donor. In fact, many people are interested in their genetic origins notwithstanding a nurturing family. Being a loving, supportive parent may include helping a child pursue their interest in their origin.

### **Seeking Support during Treatment**

Getting information from the clinic and from insurance companies about costs and coverage is usually time-consuming and often frustrating. Because the cost is considerable, couples sometimes need to alter their original plan. Coming to a consensus about what the plan should be can be difficult.

Consulting with a mental health practitioner experienced in the field of reproductive technology is another part of getting prepared. Same sex couples may initially wonder whether they are being singled out or feel that, because they have thought about their plan at length, counseling should not be a requirement. However counseling is the standard of care for all patients using gamete donations. The counselor will have certain topics to discuss. But the most worthwhile meetings for clients are when they bring up their particular concerns as well.

Developing realistic expectations for how long the process will take is also important. Even under the best circumstances, it can take a long time to get pregnant. Thinking about what will help in getting through a stressful time is essential. For some women that will mean simplifying their life and for others it will mean planning distractions.

Support systems are important in every family's life. Inevitably these systems shift with the arrival of a child.

For those who have had problematic relationships with their families of origin, the prospect of a child can be an opportunity to rework that relationship. Indeed, all new parents need to rework their relationships with their families.

Couples will want to think about how they will manage information about donors, treatment, pregnancy and delivery to achieve the goals of protecting themselves and a prospective child while taking into account the particular ways that their families operate. For example, there is a broad range of ways that couples can handle the information about the donor with family and

friends. On the one hand, people may share all information about the donor because they think that family and friends will be interested and that this is a good way to include them in the process. On the other hand, people may limit what they say to a simple statement that they are happy with the information about the donor. They do this because they want to be sure that they are the first people to give their child that information.

Being part of a supportive community is also very helpful for new families. In large urban areas there are often LGBT organizations that particularly address the needs of families. They may have support groups for prospective parents and sponsor functions for families. Later on, being part of these organizations may provide opportunities for children to be with families built like theirs.

### **Becoming Parents**

Families built so intentionally have many strengths; this is supported by research that shows that on the whole children do well. Parenting is always challenging and rewarding with each kind of family having its own set of particular issues. Families with same sex parents are squarely in the broad and expanding spectrum of the modern American family.

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