

# **The Internet as Host to Donor-Shared Sibling Groups**

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# The Rise of Commercial Sperm Banks

- Commercial banks operated on the basis of anonymity. The banks assumed no one would ever find anyone else
- Along with promising anonymity, by selling sperm, these banks deconstructed individuals. This was generativity without responsibility
- Bodily fragmentation uncouples intercourse from procreation and procreation from personhood

# Along come the Registries

## “People Finding Sites”

- Independent Internet sites allow donor-created families to search for others who share the same donor.
- Donor siblings – offspring who share the same donor – can register and have contact with one another.
- The donor’s number which was used to dissociate men from their gametes is precisely the same number families use to connect to one another.
- 95% of DSR (largest U.S website) posts are families that used sperm donation
- 11,000 matches so far and a rising number of anonymous donors now searching for genetic offspring
- But we’re focusing on parents (rather than offspring or donors)

# Look-Alike Groups



**DONOR SIBLING REGISTRY**  
EDUCATING, CONNECTING AND SUPPORTING DONOR FAMILIES

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## EDUCATING CONNECTING & SUPPORTING DONOR FAMILIES

The DSR has helped to connect more than **11139** half-siblings (and/or donors) with each other.

The total number of registrants, including donors, parents and donor conceived people, is **42855**.

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# KEY QUESTIONS

The ability to locate genetic paternal kin raised questions for those parents who have children conceived from donor gametes (it raised a similar set of questions, of course, for the offspring):

1. Whether to search for their children's donor siblings?
2. If found, what kind of relationship, if any, do these strangers initiate?
  - Types of Communication and Location of Contact
  - Frequency of Contact
  - Why Contact Continues
3. How is genetic kin turned into a social relationship, especially, when these children and their parents have no legal, functional or emotional obligations to one another?
4. What do these people mean to one another?

# DEMOGRAPHIC DATA and METHODS

## **Single mothers by Choice Organization members send a link to an online survey.**

N= 587 respondents (66% response)

(note: 9 respondents dropped from analysis because they did not have children)

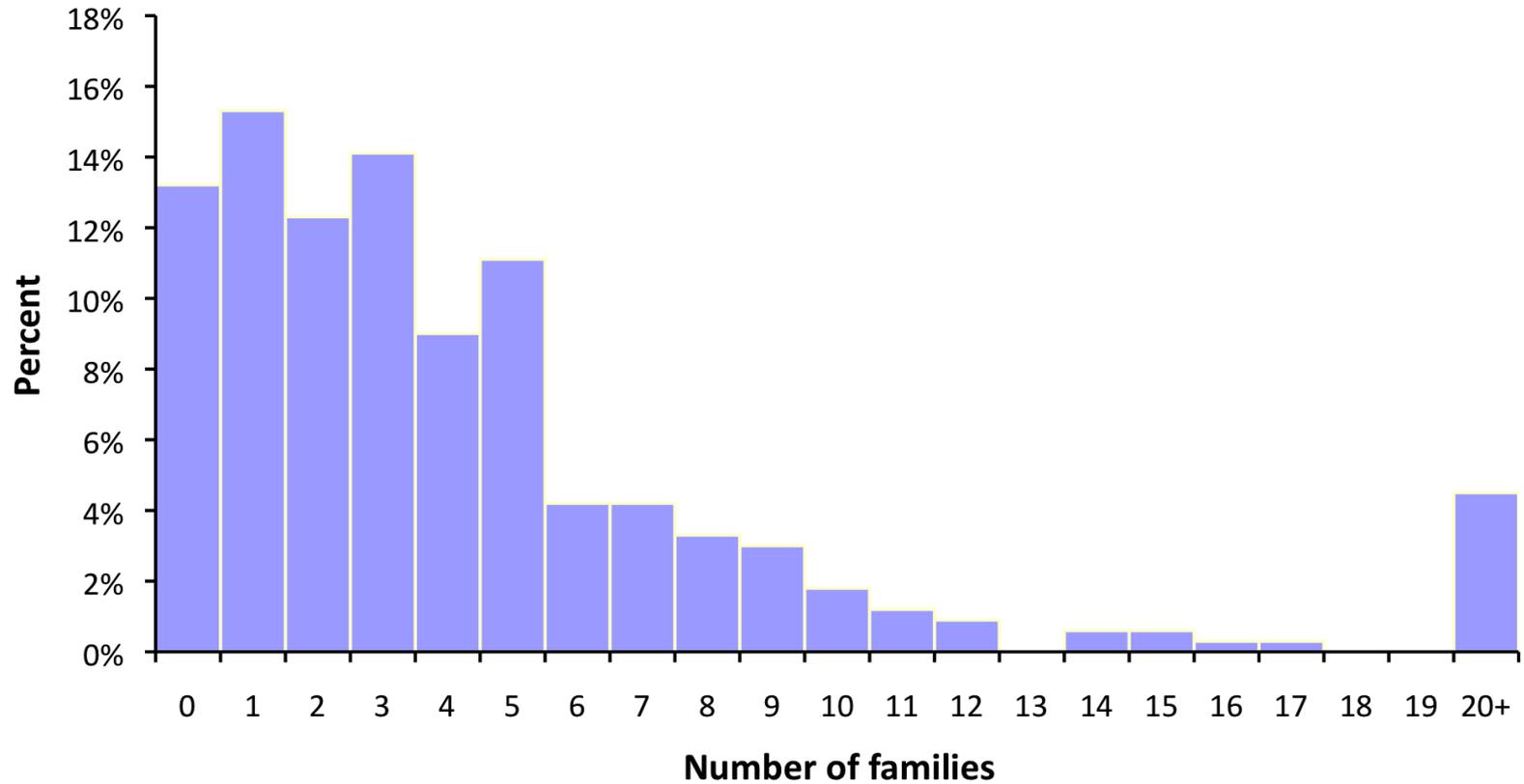
1. Respondents are all women
  - 76% are single, never married
  - 92% white
  - 84% between 30-49 years old
  
2. Number of donor-conceived children:
  - 75% reported one donor-conceived child; 25% reported between 2 and 4 children
  
3. Age of Children:
  - 60% of the oldest child is under age 4
  - 27% had are between 5 and 9 years of age
  - 13% over the age of 10 years
  
4. Attempts to locate donor-siblings / families:
  - 61% (N=356 of 587) have taken steps to locate shared-donor siblings
  - 84% (N=289 of 345) had found at least one shared donor family.

**Table 1.**  
**Reason for wanting to meet families with same donor**  
**(% responding extremely important or important)**

<b>Reason:</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Valid N</b>
I was curious about the other children and what qualities they share with my child.	67.4	347
I wanted my child to have the possibility of a larger extended family.	64.9	348
I wanted to know who they are in case of medical necessity.	55.8	346
I wanted relationships of some kind with the donor's other genetic children.	50.9	346
I wanted to know more about my child's paternal side.	39.7	343
My child was asking questions about his/her paternal side.	10.3	339
I was looking for more vials of sperm from the same donor to have a second child.	9	344

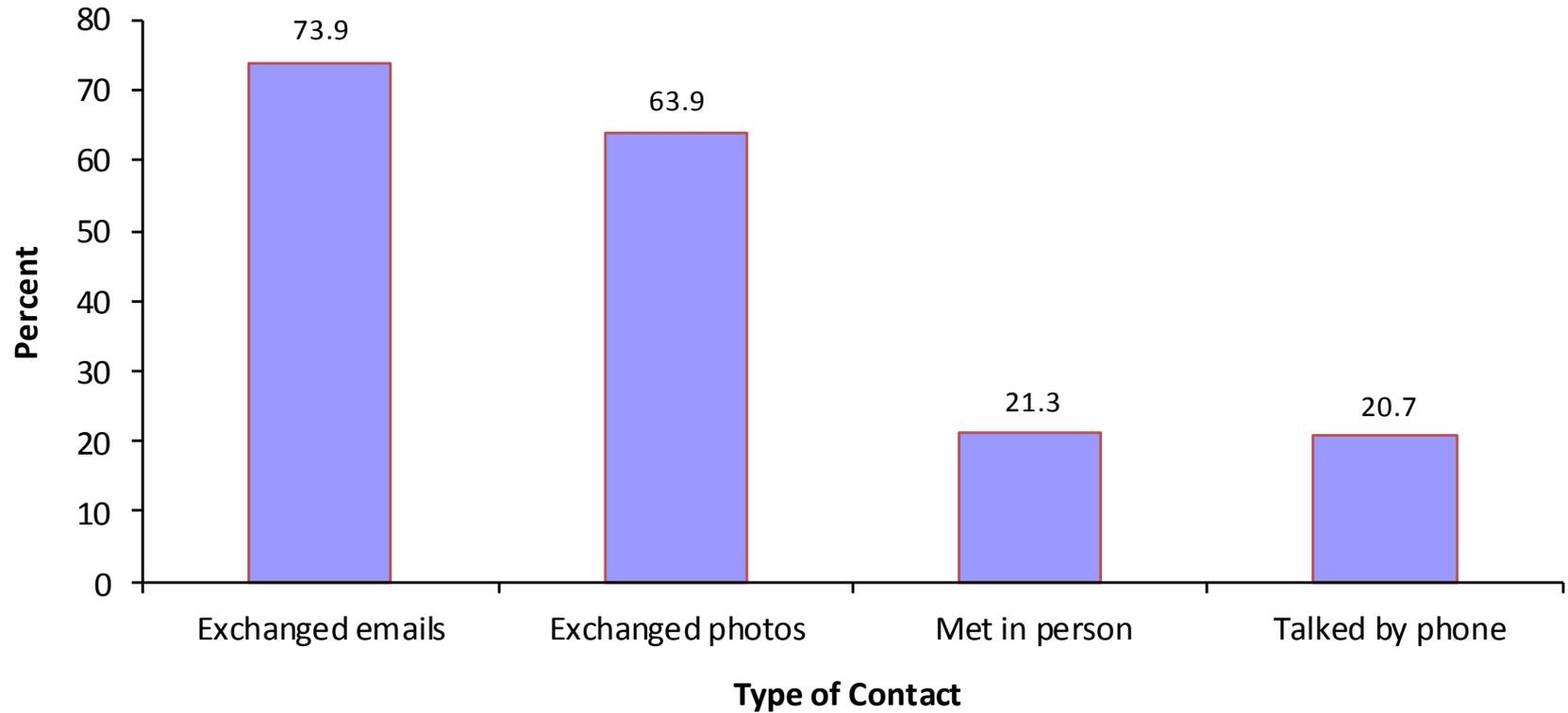
*Universe:* Respondents with donor children who have taken steps to locate donor siblings (Q12=1, N=356). Case counts in Table 1 fall below 356 because of missing responses.

**Figure 1.**  
**Number of shared donor families found**



*Universe:* See Table 1. Valid N = 333.

**Figure 2.**  
**Percentage of families found with whom the respondent has:**



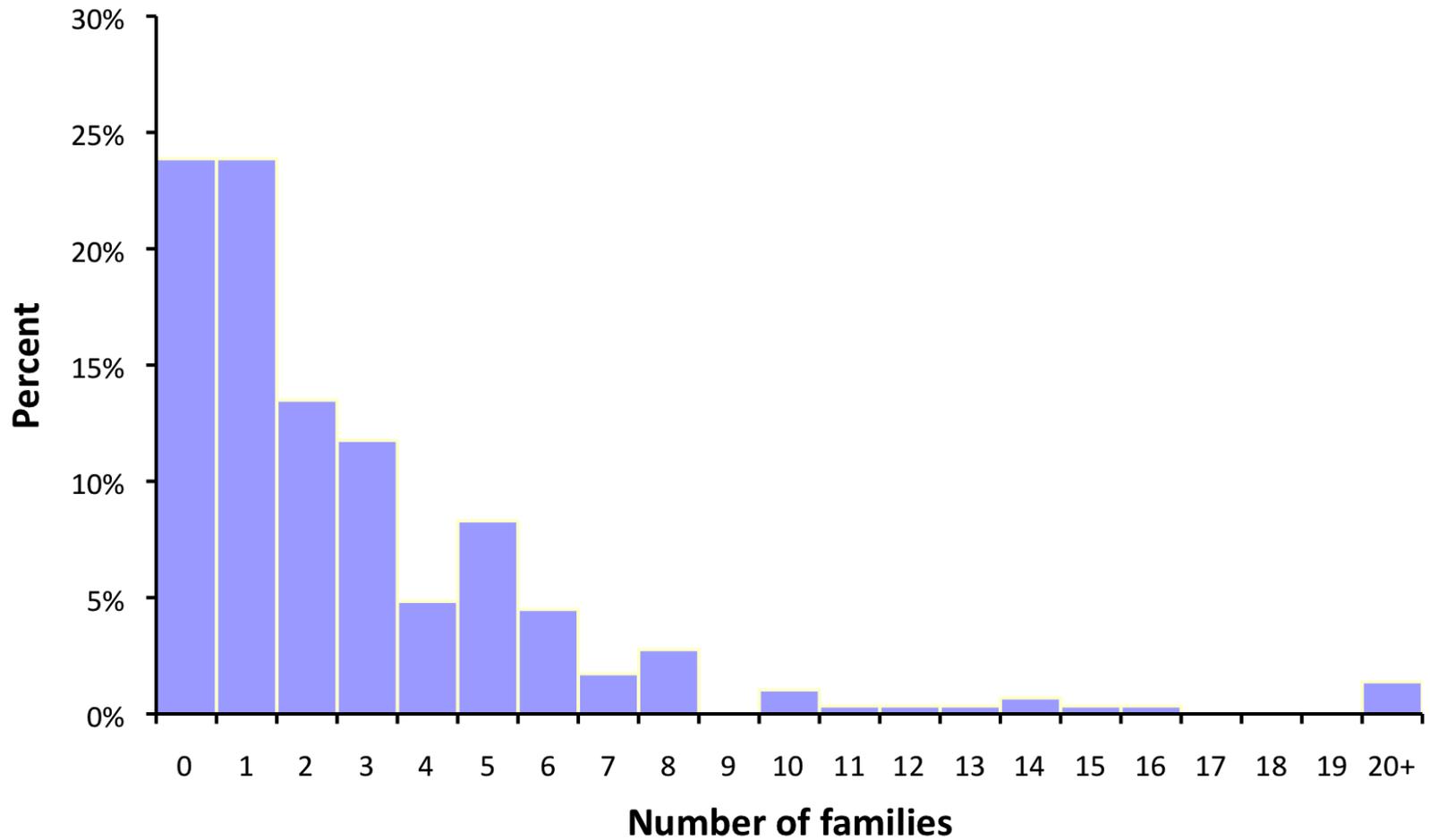
*Universe:* Respondents who have found 1 or more donor families (N=289)

## Internet photos made people feel like family:

I think half-siblings was a concept but to see their pictures and their snapshots of them at the zoo or in their Halloween costumes – to see them in their lives and to see these real children just made it real. And this may sound odd but they all have very round faces and a specific eye shape and in this way they do look like siblings.... It must be from the donor. I started to want a relationship with the other families regardless of what [my child] may want.... It was this physical connection and then I felt emotionally engaged and I felt surprised by it. And when I saw these kids I thought, “woow these kids are my daughter’s family and they are part of her extended family.

**Figure 3.**

**Number of donor families with whom respondent remains in contact**



*Universe:* Respondents who have found 1 or more donor families (N=289).

**Table 2.**

**Average number of contacts per year with donor families**

<b>Mode of contact:</b>	<b>Average # of contacts/year</b>
Internet group	14.2
E-mail to individuals	10.2
E-mail to group	5.9
Phone	2.3

*Universe:* Respondents who maintain contact with at least 1 donor family (N=220).

**Table 3.**  
**Frequency of exchange of particular types  
of information with donor families**

<b>Reason:</b>	<b>Always/Often</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Rarely/Never</b>	<b>N</b>
We exchange photos.	49.8%	20.8%	29.4%	289
We exchange information about children's personalities.	47.4%	24.6%	28.0%	289
We exchange information about children's milestones.	42.9%	23.2%	33.9%	289
We exchange information about children's talents and accomplishments.	39.1%	26.6%	34.3%	289
We exchange health information.	36.0%	25.6%	38.4%	289
We exchange news about new donor siblings.	33.2%	16.6%	50.2%	289

*Universe:* Respondents who have found 1 or more donor families (N=289).

## CONTACT ON THE INTERNET (Groups and Individuals)

“We are very scattered geographically so email/Yahoo makes the most sense (we have a Yahoo group). Some contribute more, some less, it's probably just personal preference.”

“I have a different relationship with each of [my daughter's] siblings, but, like I get to be friends with them on Facebook... When I think about who I'm closer to, and when I think about [two of the girls], they're on Facebook, they write a note to me, they say happy birthday, they ask me [to support] a fund raiser for women's breast cancer [or] whatever.”

## Exchanging information about health the donor profile doesn't provide:

“She had a febrile seizure a few weeks ago and it hit me that I remember them saying that there was some thinking it’s genetically linked. I thought I should actually share this on that Yahoo group with people with the same sperm donor in case anybody else encounters this. If this helps them, would it be less panic the first time it happens .... So I think it’s got the potential to be a useful resource.”

**Table 4.**

**Why have you decided not to connect with donor siblings?  
(choose all that apply)**

<b>Reason:</b>	<b>Percent</b>
If my child(ren) want to find them when they are older, I will search for donor siblings then.	53.70%
Undecided	40.70%
I don't consider them as related to us simply because we used the same donor.	33.30%
Meeting other families whose children share the same donor is not important to me.	26.80%
We have a large extended family already and I don't feel the need to expand it.	14.30%
We may not like one another and then it would be awkward.	11.70%

*Universe:* Respondents who have not taken steps to locate donor siblings (universe based on Q12, N=231)

## PEOPLE NEGOTIATE LANGUAGE :

“So we need better language [to describe these relationships] and this is one of the things that I’ve been talking about with the woman who started the private Yahoo group is that she and her wife are very uncomfortable ...with [the terms] “half sibling” or “donor half sibling” or “genetic half sibling.”

And what she says which hits home for me, is that we have a word that we use for sperm donors which is “donors.” We’re not saying “biological father” or “genetic father.” We’re not using that language in any way. [But] we’re using sibling language around this and I don’t like that. She doesn’t like it and I’m inclined to agree. It’s just you have to make up words that aren’t common parlance to get the rest of the group talking to each other without using the words that make people uncomfortable. “

**There is another issue:  
The groups can get unwieldy**

## DELIMITING MEMBERSHIP

“Our group is to the point of feeling "critical mass". When child #12 and #13 came on board, people shunned them a bit, because it was just more kids by this donor, which you don't want too many of. Intellectually, you know differently, but there's a strong social dynamic operating already beneath the surface. Since the [initial] 4 families had already established a nice personal email group, and it felt intimate....Too many families and the dynamics are a problem [even on the internet].”

# So, what does the internet provide for people who are genetic strangers?

- It becomes an end in itself: a place to sell and buy sperm, eggs, and embryos (and to find surrogates)
- It is a place for strangers to become “kin” which defies the (sperm) banks’ original intent for no paternal kin
- Once located it is a place to create shared meanings, share information, and feel connected.
- It is also a place to exclude others and shape a group

# Concluding Thoughts: The Internet is a Counter-Influence

- Parents purchase gametes. Until recently they were unaware of possibly connecting on the internet.
- Now they can not only connect, but along with their children they can become an influence on policy (e.g., advocating for the end of anonymity; the regulation of numbers of offspring and gametes sold).
- Through the internet, they have put together what the banks deconstructed and sold. They may shape the reproductive practices of the future.

**THE END**