



Donor dad Dave Meslin takes a nap with son Santiago
handout

In a changing world of family diversity, kids don't care where love comes from

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Last week, an old high-school pal of mine, the activist and writer Dave Meslin, came out of the closet. The secret in question was not that he was gay (he isn't) but that he is the biological father of a 10-year-old boy, whose primary parents are two women he's been close friends with for years.

Last week Mez (as he is known to friends) published an account of his "donor dad" story, in the Huffington Post. The story received thousands of "likes" and "shares" almost instantly, and it coincided with another Internet sensation – a photo of two gay men weeping while holding their just-born son as the smiling surrogate mother looked on.

What do these two viral stories have in common? They are both examples of how alternative family models, in which biological parents take a secondary role to non-biological parents, are changing the face of the contemporary family. Whether it's children born through donor sperm, donor eggs, open adoption, to same-sex or single-parents-by-choice, a rapidly growing number of kids are being born into families where they might have three parents. This in itself is not a new social trend; what is new is the level of openness involved.

In Mez's case, his close friends and family have always known about his son Santiago – but he remained

publicly quiet about it (refraining from posting pictures of his son on social media, for instance) out of respect for the primary family. His role as a father, he explains, is one without responsibility or financial obligation but also without rights. He sees his son regularly and has never missed a birthday, but at the same time he defers to Santiago's mothers, whom he describes as "the main family unit." Once his son was old enough to have a conversation about their relationship – one in which Mez basically said, "You know I'm your Dad, right?" and Santiago said, "Yeah, I know," – he decided to go public. And why? Because Mez wanted to encourage others, who might be fearful or hesitant about open donation, to take the plunge.

As he put it to me in a phone interview this week, "People can be very fearful about these kinds of scenarios, but it's mostly displaced fear. I want to say to people contemplating using sperm or egg donation to go with a known donor, ideally a friend. There are so many advantages for everyone involved – the kid, the donor and the family as a whole. Don't go anonymous because there might be complications. The fact is there are potential complications in every relationship."

Nora Spinks, CEO of the Vanier Institute of the Family in Ottawa, says that while it's admittedly difficult to attach precise numbers to the ever-shifting face of the Canadian family, she has observed a sea change of openness in recent years. "Families are diversifying from coast to coast to coast and it's exciting because they are also the most adaptable institution we have," she told me.

One of the major reasons so many of us are better able to be open about diversity within families is the relatively recent realization that children are probably better equipped than adults at accepting difference and not being threatened by the unconventional.

While for years the received wisdom was that we ought to "protect" our children from the truth of unconventional birth circumstance (be it adoption, sperm or egg donation or surrogacy), we are learning that children are probably better able to accept and understand alternative family models, mainly because they have no "normal" to compare them to.

"Kids really don't care where the love comes from and what the legal definitions are, or where their genes come from," says Spinks. "As they get older and they see society putting people into boxes they'll try to see which box fits, but at the outset they have far less baggage than adults do."

Of course, as with all relationships involving humans, issues do arise. The New York writer David Dodge, who has been keeping a diary of his experience of being an openly gay sperm donor for his two lesbian friends on The New York Times website, recently wrote about the tricky business of managing his bootie-knitting parents' expectations about becoming biological grandparents. "I decided to donate not for our own benefit, I remind them, but so my friends could start their family," he writes.

And things can and do go badly awry. I have personally known same-sex parents who ended up in court with their donors and heard of custodial disputes between adoptive and biological parents. But I have also known many conventional heterosexual partnerships that ended up in court or worse – simply tearing apart a child's life with prolonged anger and conflict.

When progressive families work, it's for the same reason conventional families do. Out of love and mutual respect. What could be simpler than that?