

“Mommy,



A generous donation: Helene Rosenberg and husband Yakov Epstein with their 2-year-old ovum donation twins, Nathaniel, (left), and Allegra.

STEVE WINTER/Black Star



where did I come from?"

by Melinda Blau

The answer used to be relatively simple. But today, thanks to breakthroughs on the fertility frontier, many parents have to come up with pretty complicated responses. Here, four families share the remarkable birth stories they told their kids—plus the messages *every* child needs to hear.

I was at the movies when you let me know you were ready to come into the world..." Oddly enough, both my children's birth stories begin the same way. *Last Summer* and *The Hanging of Judge Roy Bean*—titles of otherwise unmemorable movies—have become part of Jennifer's and Jeremy's histories. My kids, who are now 25 and 22, still delight in hearing about when they were born, who was there, and what it was like. And why not? The story of a person's birth is both magical and essential to her sense of identity.

"For children, how they were born is important in terms of understanding who they are and where they fit into their families—and into the world," says Anne Bernstein, Ph.D., a psychologist in Berkeley, California, and author of *Flight of the Stork: What Children Think (and When) about Sex and Family Building*. "Their natural curiosity about birth is also a first step toward thinking about cause and effect, so encouraging questions and answering responsively helps a child to become an active explorer of the world."

This is the Nineties, however. And though kids' questions about birth remain the same, many parents' answers have changed. Certainly, everybody's story still begins with a sperm and an

egg. But nowadays, that story might entail an explanation of *whose* sperm or egg or who carried the baby, as the four families we present here prove. These parents have all had to cope with very complex issues regarding conception and birth. The responses they've given their kids can be helpful—and inspirational—to all parents.

Donor Babies

Helene Rosenberg and Yakov Epstein
Highland Park, New Jersey

"Recently, when my kids started to call me 'Mama,' I realized that pretty soon I'd have to tell them how they were born," says Helene Rosenberg about Nathaniel and Allegra, her 2-year-old twins who were conceived with the help of ovum donation. "We've started writing fairy tales to help them learn about their conception. One is called 'The Right Seed'—about planting seeds and enabling them to grow."

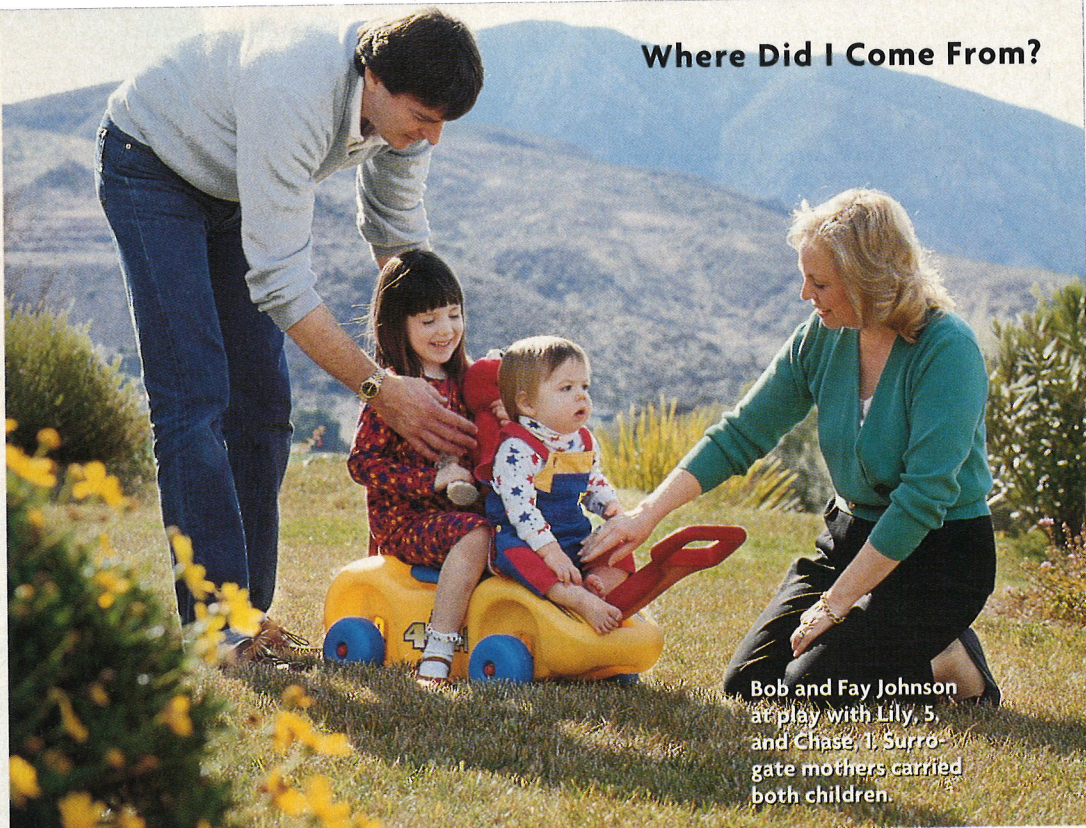
Helene, an infertility educator in her mid-40s, and her husband, Yakov Epstein, 53, a psychologist, decided on ovum donation after Helene had suffered several miscarriages. The couple opted for a "closed" type of donation—the young woman in her 20s who donated the eggs for \$2,000 would not stay in touch with them after she ►

had given birth. "She viewed herself as a blood donor," explains Helane. "You don't find out where your blood goes."

Helane and her husband already show their kids a videotape of her pregnancy. "I want them to know that they were inside me, that I'm their mommy," she says. "When the time comes, I'll explain, 'Mommy had trouble with her eggs.'"

Although Helane never intends to call the donor anything other than "the nice lady who donated her eggs," she says, "I plan to tell them as much as I know about her. She was a student, had blond hair, and was very athletic. And she was gutsy, with a real air of confidence about her body." Helane already sees some of these traits in Nathaniel and Allegra. "At Gymboree, they're two of the most athletic kids in the group. Their mommy isn't like that!"

And what if, one day, the kids want to find their biological mother? "We'll tell them the truth, that the donor doesn't want to be found," says Helane. "Sure, they could hire private detectives at 18, but I believe that if we an-



Bob and Fay Johnson at play with Lily, 5, and Chase, 1. Surrogate mothers carried both children.

swer their questions honestly, they won't experience the struggle that adolescents go through when they find out about their birth in a negative way."

Helane and Yakov's experiences spurred them to write *Getting Pregnant When You Thought You Couldn't*. As ex-

perts and as parents, they recognize the need to continuously lay a foundation on which to build their children's trust and understanding. The twins are already used to hearing the word "donor" in conversation. "Nathaniel mimics 'doughnut,'" says Helane. "We're sure he's going to think he was conceived at Dunkin' Donuts!"

What All Children Need to Know

Remember, telling your child her birth story is a process, not an event; expect to have ongoing discussions from age 2 on. Some important reminders:

- 1. STRESS HOW MUCH YOU WANTED TO BE A PARENT.** All children want to know that their arrival was a loving, well-thought-out process.
- 2. RESPECT YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT LEVEL.** By age 3, most kids will ask if they were in their mommy's tummy; by 4 or 5, they'll begin to put together birth and conception; by 5 or 6, they'll ask the same questions again and understand more. Read child development books to gauge what your child can understand. Don't be surprised if your child doesn't fully grasp the process until he's 9, 10, or 11.
- 3. FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE.** Tell what you were doing when you went into labor, what you ate, what you wore. If you've kept a baby scrapbook, show first-day pictures; or show the hospital I.D. tag. Pull out special baby gifts. This reassures kids that parents recognize the importance of their birth.

4. DON'T MIX CONCEPTION AND BIRTH. Children under age 3 may not be able to grasp the birds and the bees, but they can appreciate the events of their birth. Stress how excited everyone was about your child's arrival and how you spread the news.

5. FIND OUT WHAT THEY REALLY WANT TO KNOW. If you're not sure what your child is asking, respond with: "What do you think?" This will help you grasp what your child already knows or guesses.

6. REASSURE YOUR CHILD SHE'S THE SAME AS OTHER KIDS. Before you rush to explain special arrangements or exotic medical techniques, be sure to tell your child, "All babies are made with a sperm and an egg," and "All babies grow in a woman's uterus."

7. GET HELP. If talking about conception and birth makes you uncomfortable, practice giving explanations with adults, read books, or consult a professional. Rather than lie, it's much better to say, "I'm not ready to talk about that now, but I will eventually."

Saved by Surrogacy

Fay and Bob Johnson
Camarillo, California

"We were all waiting for you to be born," begins the tale that Fay Johnson tells her 5-year-old, Lily, who was born to a surrogate mother. "At seven o'clock, the phone rang. Natalie told us we should meet her at the hospital."

Fay, 48, started telling "The Night Before Lily" to her daughter the day she came home from the hospital. "I would be changing or feeding her and I'd say, 'Daddy and I tried to have a baby for a long time. But Mommy's tummy is broken. Daddy and I were sad. Then we found a wonderful woman who carried you in her tummy.'"

Fay and her husband, Bob, 47, an attorney, didn't start trying to have kids until Fay was in her mid-30s. After struggling with infertility, the couple decided on surrogacy. "It took us a year to get the money [\$30,000]; we had to take out a second mortgage."

Some women in the support group Fay joined thought she was "way out" to try to explain surrogacy to such a ▶

The Brave New World of Fertility

In the last decade, nearly 35,000 babies have been born with the help of assisted reproductive technology (ART). The most common is in-vitro fertilization (IVF), whereby an egg and sperm are retrieved, fertilized in a laboratory dish, and returned to the uterus. IVF may be used in conjunction with:

ARTIFICIAL (OR DONOR) INSEMINATION Sperm from a mate or donor are injected into a woman's uterus.

EMBRYO ADOPTION An embryo is implanted in a mother or surrogate.

OVUM DONATION An egg is retrieved from another woman's body, and by one or a combination of several ARTs implanted in a mother or surrogate's uterus.

SURROGACY Most common is traditional surrogacy: The husband's sperm is inseminated in a surrogate. With gestational surrogacy, an egg (the mother's or a donor's) and sperm (the father's or a donor's) are implanted in a surrogate.

For infertility help, call the RESOLVE Help Line at (617) 623-0744. For adoption information, call Adoptive Families of America at (800) 372-3300.

young child. "Lily has always known her story, and no one can ever hurt her with it," says Fay, firmly. "Family secrets become lethal secrets."

Last year, when Fay and Bob decided to have another child, Lily accompanied her parents and Tracie, the surrogate mother, on obstetrician visits. One day, Lily piped up to a woman in the waiting room, "You know, I came out of Natalie's tummy. And my little brother is going to pop out of Tracie!"

So far Lily has been more interested in the mechanics of birth, not conception. "If she came to me today and asked, 'I'd say, 'Every baby is made the same,'" says Fay. "And then I'd explain with whose sperm and whose egg."

Undoubtedly, she and Bob will have to field many more questions from Lily and her brother, Chase, since they maintain ties with both surrogate mothers. The family has twice visited Natalie, who lives in Missouri and has five kids. "I don't use the term 'half-sisters' yet," says Fay. "But Lily knows they're Natalie's children—and that they came out of Natalie's tummy like she did."

Single by Choice

Susan Anderson
Mobile, Alabama

The first question Hanne Anderson ever asked about her beginnings, "Why don't I have a Daddy?" was uttered when she was 2½. "She saw that other kids at preschool had daddies,"

"Lily has always known her story," says Fay, firmly. "Family secrets become lethal secrets."

recalls her mother, Susan, 46, a professor of psychology and a single mother by choice. "I told her, 'There are different types of families. Some have a mom and a dad. In our family we just have a mom.' And she was satisfied."

Susan had always longed for a child. At 39, unmarried and with "no prospects" for a mate, she began to explore her options. She found that single

parents are often discouraged from adoption. And she dismissed the idea of having intercourse with a male friend. "For me, donor insemination was emotionally cleaner."

Telling Hanne was never an issue. "The most important thing is to make her aware that she is loved and wanted. I've always tried to answer honestly, given her level of understanding."

At age 4, Hanne became curious about pregnancy. "But she wasn't interested in how the baby got there," says Susan. Around that same time, Hanne's interest in fathers was rekindled, but the two were separate concepts. "She had some sense that a father was needed to have a baby. And she knew that a doctor helped me have a baby. But she wasn't really interested in details."

A moment of truth occurred when Hanne was 5 years old. A girl at school announced, "Everyone has a dad," and Hanne responded, "No, I don't." One little boy tried to come to her rescue by explaining, "Her dad died,"

Where Did I Come From?

but Hanne was adamant. "She was very upset when she came home from school that day," says Susan.

Susan knew it was time to help her child understand her history. "I explained that she doesn't have a dad. A dad is someone who loves and helps take care of you. Everyone has a father, though. He's the one who contributes

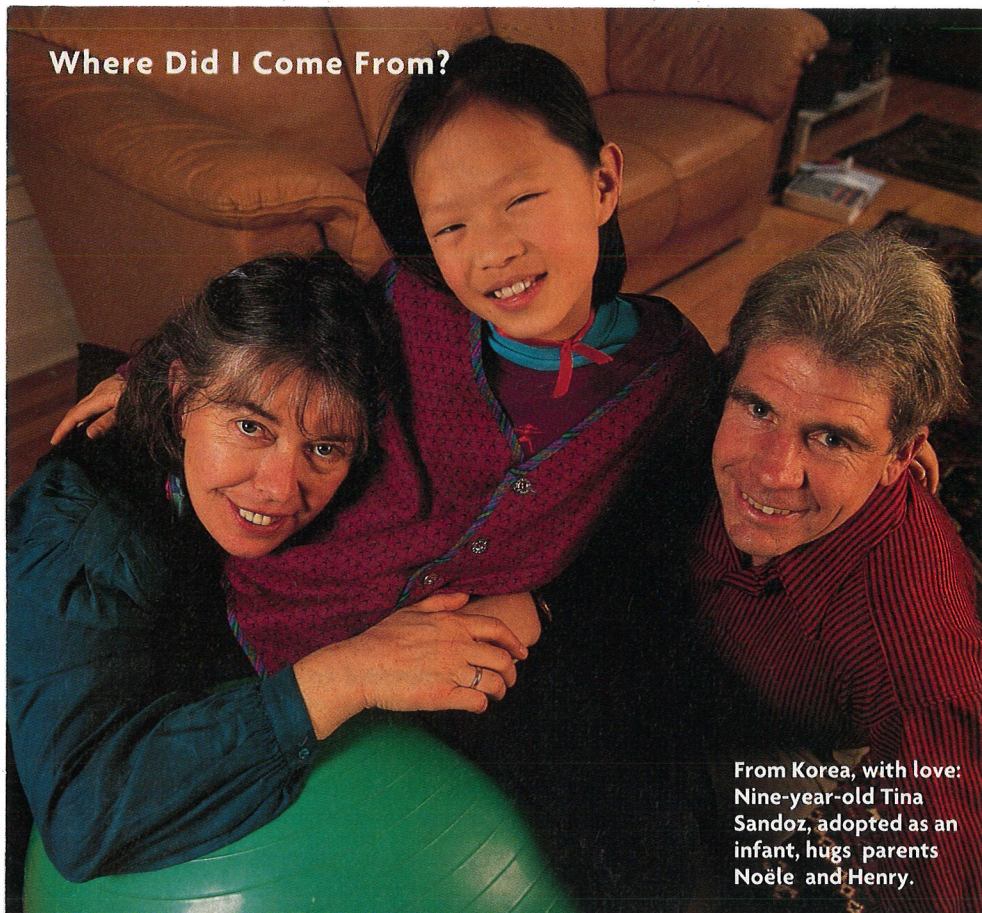
the sperm so that the baby can begin to grow. I showed her *How You Were Born*, a book about how the sperm and egg get together. And I explained that what happened in my situation is different—that there are some men we call 'donors' who want to help women who don't have husbands, so they contribute the sperm.

"Hanne looked relieved and said, ►

Susan Anderson takes a ride with her one and only, Hanne, 6, who was conceived through artificial insemination.



Where Did I Come From?



From Korea, with love: Nine-year-old Tina Sandoz, adopted as an infant, hugs parents Noële and Henry.

'Well, then I do have a father!' And her next question was, 'What did he look like?' I told her that I had never seen her father but that I knew he had blond hair and blue eyes. Immediately, Hanne said, 'I have blond hair and blue eyes,' and at that point she seemed satisfied," Susan says.

Hanne, now 6, loves to hear about her birth story. "I often talk about the day she was born," says Susan. "We have a lot of pictures. I point out that her story is just like that of other kids." And every year, she and Hanne attend a "birthday party" sponsored by the lab in New Orleans that helped Susan conceive.

Susan expects to continue the dialogue with Hanne in years to come. "I found *My Story*, an English book about donor insemination. It's written from the viewpoint of a couple. When I read it to Hanne, she puts her hand over the man. She's trying to make it reflect *her* story."

Once in a while, Hanne will say she "wishes" she had a dad, but Susan isn't too concerned. "You know how only children say they wish they had a brother or sister? That's how she says it. The next day it's no big deal. She doesn't seem to feel that anything is missing," says Susan. In fact, when Hanne started kindergarten this year,

Susan was careful to warn the teacher: "Hanne is likely to say 'I don't have a dad, I have a donor!'"

"A" Is for Adoption

Noële and Henry Sandoz
Western Massachusetts

"A-Day" is cause for a bigger celebration in the Sandoz household than 9-year-old Tina's birthday. "It's the day she arrived," beams her mom, Noële, a

"I told her, 'There are different types of families. Some have a mom and a dad. In our family, we just have a mom.'"

dental hygienist. She and her husband, Henry, a writer, adopted their daughter from her native country, Korea, when Tina was 4 months old. "When Henry and I saw the escort at the airport carrying our baby, it was so intense," recalls Noële, 52. "It was as if some external force created a heat wave over our heads. We started to sob."

The arrival of Christina Kyung-ok (which means "Auspice-Jade") was the end of a long, hard road of applications, arrangements, and disappointments.

"The bureaucracy and the legality is overwhelming," says Noële. She and Henry, 53, who live in a quiet community in western Massachusetts, have always been extremely forthcoming about their situation, so Tina has heard the word "adopted" ever since her arrival. But at various stages of her development, she has had a different understanding of what it means.

"She was about 3 when she started to notice the eye difference," says Noële. After that, Noële, who regularly visited Tina's preschool classroom to run sing-alongs, made certain that her repertoire included "songs that talk about and praise difference—different skin, eye shapes, hair."

One day when Tina was 4 and sick with the chicken pox, Noële says, "I took out the Snuggli she came in when she arrived and pictures from the airport. And I told her, 'You have two mothers: a birth mother and me.'" Soon after, she showed Tina a picture of Korean dancers in a brochure. "I said, 'This is how your mother could look,'" recalls Noële. "She pointed to a dancer and said, 'I want this one.'"

The Sandozes actually know very little about Tina's birth mother, except for the fact that she was unmarried. "But we make it clear that her mother didn't reject her out of lack of love for her," says Noële. "She was unable to raise a child at that time."

When Tina was around 5, she took to climbing under Noële's shirt and saying, "Let's pretend you're giving birth to me," leaving her mother to wonder if her daughter had a sense of loss. "She hasn't asked to meet her birth mother," says Noële. "But someday we'll go to Korea to see her country."

The Sandozes believe it's important to honor Tina's roots on an everyday basis. Tina, now 9, has a Korean "big sister"—a student at a nearby college who talks to her about Korea and its customs. Noële and Henry have also learned how to cook some traditional Korean foods, and Tina attends a Korean culture camp.

Adopted children exhibit a range of curiosity about their origins. So far, Tina is just mildly inquisitive. "The discussions come and go," says Noële. "The truth is, telling your child her story is a lifelong process." ■

Melinda Blau, author of *Families Apart: Ten Keys to Successful Co-Parenting*, has won several awards for this column.