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My Daddy's Name is Donor?

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The t-shirt on the toddler is meant to be an attention-getter . . . and it is. A picture of the boy wearing the t-shirt appeared first in the *Chicago Tribune* but now also in *The Times* [London]. The t-shirt reads, “My daddy’s name is Donor.”

As Catherine Bruton of *The Times* explains:

The T-shirt is offered by a company called Family Evolutions, founded by a lesbian couple whose son modelled the shirt. The co-founder, Stacey Harris, says that the T-shirt is empowering. “We want to lift the taboo surrounding donor conception so that kids don’t feel that their coming into the world is a shameful secret,” she says. “Kids who are empowered will grow up well-adjusted.”

The “empowering” t-shirt is intended to mainstream the idea that the male agent in procreation now no longer deserves even a name. The sale of sperm is now so commonplace that it is now just one more consumer good — and an increasing number of consumers are single women and lesbian couples who share an intention to have babies without a husband.

Bruton’s article considers the controversy over the t-shirt and the response of Elizabeth Marquardt of the Institute for American Values. Marquardt insisted that her concern was not that the boy was being raised by lesbians, suggesting that the lesbian aspect of the situation was “fine with me.” Rather, her concern is about the redefinition of parenthood by technology.

As she explained, “What troubles me is that children today are being raised in an era of increasingly flexible definitions of parenthood, definitions that often serve the interests of adults without regard for children.”

Her concern about children conceived with donor sperm is echoed by Narelle Grech, a “donor-conceived activist” in Melbourne, Australia:

“The poor kid wearing the shirt is basically being told that his dad is not important and is just a donor. I am sure he is one of many donor-conceived people, like myself, who are made to feel like they cannot be sad about the loss of their birth fathers.”

The controversy has arisen with particular force in Great Britain, where a new policy removed donor anonymity. As Bruton explains, “Since April 2005, anyone registering to be a donor has done so knowing that a child can seek identifying information once he or she reaches 18.”

All this certainly complicates the picture for potential donors (who now know that they cannot remain anonymous to any child produced by the sperm), donor-conceived children (who now must decide whether to obtain donor information and attempt contact), and prospective parents (who now cannot keep children from obtaining the identifying information once the child turns 18).

The controversy in *The Times* raises a host of related issues. Unlike Marquardt, a large number of persons *will* be concerned about the idea of lesbian couples having children by simply obtaining donor sperm — the only male contribution to the entire relationship being the donation of gametes. The context is significant. Most persons would likely express far less moral concern about a married couple using the same technology in the event of the husband’s

infertility.

Still, the change in relational context does not alter the moral status of the technology itself. The abstraction of procreation from the act of sexual intercourse shared by the husband and wife — the conjugal act — opens the door for all manner of moral problems. The technologies of assisted reproduction by donor sperm [AID] and In Vitro Fertilization [IVF] bring moral risk, whatever the context or use. The more the procreation is abstracted from marriage and the marital act, the greater the risk and responsibility.

This becomes all too clear when reports now indicate that a *majority* of those requesting and using Artificial Insemination by Donor [AID] are now single women and lesbian couples. A quick survey of the situation in major metropolitan areas will make that pretty clear. Sperm banks are now big business.

These realities are signs of what is let loose when sexuality is decoupled from marriage. Before long, it may not be controversial at all to see a toddler wearing a t-shirt that reads, “My daddy’s name is Donor.”

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