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# 'It's a bit like a legend where you have to tell it again and again': disclosure practices in single father families via surrogacy

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## ABSTRACT

**Aims/Background:** Research has shown that children born through surrogacy to heterosexual and gay couples are often told about this at an early age. However, to our knowledge no studies have explored how single fathers approach telling and talking about their route to parenthood with their children conceived via surrogacy and egg donation.

**Design/Methods:** The current sample comprises twenty-one fathers of children aged 4 months to 6-years-old who were born using surrogacy and egg donation. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with fathers about their experiences of telling their child about their surrogacy birth. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Results:** All the fathers had disclosed or intended to disclose. Two overarching themes were identified: personal considerations and practical considerations. Within each overarching theme, fathers' narratives centred around motivations to disclose, their approach, and the content of disclosure conversations. Nine further sub-themes were identified.

**Conclusion:** This study provides new insight into single fathers' approaches to disclosure. Fathers felt strongly about disclosing, and many had begun to reflect on how to approach disclosure. Fathers considered at what age to disclose, they deliberated about their choice of terminology, and felt resources, such as books, were helpful aids for disclosure. The findings have relevance for fertility and parenting counsellors working with single fathers.

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## KEYWORDS

Single fathers; parenthood; surrogacy; egg donation; disclosure

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been rising media (Johnson, 2015; Turchi & Bernabo, 2020) and academic (Carone et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2023; Tsfti & Engelchin, 2024; Zadeh et al., 2022) interest in single fathers who choose to start a family alone, yet this body of literature is still in its infancy. One way in which single fathers pursue parenthood is through assisted

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reproduction, by using a surrogate and an egg donor. Initial research has explored fathers' motivations for starting a family alone (Carone et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2022) and child adjustment (Pereira, 2022). These studies have found that single fathers are primarily motivated by feeling that it is the 'right time' to have a child, a sense of time running out, and because of being financially stable (Carone et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2022). Studies examining child adjustment in single father families have found no differences between children raised by single fathers through surrogacy and children in other family types (Pereira, 2022). Thus, this emerging body of work shows that the fathers and children are faring well, however, little is known about how fathers approach talking to their children about the way in which they started their family.

There is a growing body of research on parental disclosure of children's method of conception in other family forms, i.e. heterosexual and gay couples, and single mother families. Most of these studies have focused on parents' motivations for disclosure (MacCallum & Golombok, 2007; Murray & Golombok, 2003), the timing of parent-child conversations (Blake et al., 2010; MacDougall et al., 2007) and the content of such conversations (Lysons et al., 2023; Navarro-Marshall, 2025; Readings et al., 2011; Van Parys et al., 2014).

In the main, this research has found that parents have different approaches to disclosing their child's method of conception to them; some decide not to disclose, some tell their children a brief story, whereas others provide a longer, scientific account of gamete donation (Blake et al., 2010). For many parents, conversations about disclosure are initiated when their children are very young; this strategy of disclosing at a young age has been termed 'seed planting' (MacDougall et al., 2007) and is often based on parents' desire for children to 'always know'. Other parents believe there is a 'right time' to discuss birth origins, and this is sometimes attributed to a child's age, or a specific circumstance that would enable the conversation to be raised (MacDougall et al., 2007). Different terms are employed to help explain donors (such as 'another man' or 'another lady') and donated gametes (such as 'seeds') and books are often used by parents to help tell the story of their route to parenthood (Blake et al., 2010; Freeman et al., 2016; Harper et al., 2022; Hershberger et al., 2021; MacDougall et al., 2007). Navarro-Marshall (2025) highlighted that parents need guidance on 'what', 'when' and 'how' to disclose, arguing that the general focus is on when to disclose, meaning that much less is understood about how parents navigate what is said and in what way.

Several studies have found that parents who use surrogacy to form a family tend to be more likely to tell their child about their method of conception compared to parents who used gamete donation (Greenfeld, 2008; Jadvá et al., 2012; Readings et al., 2011). Family type has also been found to have an impact; single mothers and same-sex female couples are more likely to disclose (Brewaeys, 2001) and, on average, disclose to their children at a younger age, than heterosexual couples (Jadvá et al., 2009). Within families with a child born following surrogacy, gay couples are more likely to disclose than heterosexual couples (Jadvá et al., 2019). A study of 40 male same-sex couples in the US found that 83% of the families had started disclosing to their child in early childhood, yet of those who had used a separate egg donor to the surrogate, only one third had told their child about this aspect of their birth story (Blake et al., 2016). Similar findings were reported in a study of 40 male same-sex couples in Italy (Carone et al., 2018). These studies highlight the need for research to

consider 'dual disclosure' in these families and the aspects of the journey to parenthood that parents may decide to discuss first; how to talk about the surrogate, and how to talk about the egg donor, perhaps adding a further layer of complexity regarding disclosure for these families. It is unclear whether the fathers in the studies of Blake et al. (2016) and Carone et al. (2018) chose to discuss surrogacy first because they felt it was more significant to the fathers in terms of their journey to parenthood, or because it may be easier for children to understand, given research suggesting young children's understanding of birth develops before an understanding of genetics (Williams & Smith, 2010). Interestingly, the emphasis on the gestational role of the surrogate over the genetic role of the egg donor contrasts with the importance ascribed to genetic relationships among some donor conception families (Nordqvist, 2017). In the UK longitudinal study of assisted reproduction families, most heterosexual couples using traditional surrogacy had disclosed having used a surrogate, but not the surrogate's egg, to their children at age 7 (Readings et al., 2011). By age 10, just over half of parents had disclosed to their child about using the surrogate's egg (Jadva et al., 2012). This indicates that 'partial disclosure' may best describe how some parents through surrogacy choose to approach conversations about origins with their children. Thus far, to our knowledge, there are no empirical studies of how single fathers approach disclosure. The present study aimed to explore single fathers' thoughts and feelings about disclosing their child's origins, and how they intended to approach doing so.

## Materials and methods

### Sample

The sample included 21 cisgender fathers, with an average age of 46 years (range 39–59 years-old). Most of the participants (19) identified as gay, one as heterosexual, and one as asexual. Thirteen fathers had one child, and eight fathers had two children, with the target child ranging in age from 4 months to 6 years-old ( $M = 3$  years-old). All fathers were single when they began their surrogacy journey, though four later entered relationships and were with a partner at time of interview.

The sample was international; 15 identified as European, two as both European and American, one as European and Asian, one as European and Australian, one as Australian and one did not say. In terms of ethnicity (based on UK Office for National Statistics categories), 16 fathers identified as white, three as mixed, and one as 'other'. The sample for the present study forms a subset of a larger study that also included single adoptive fathers (see e.g. Jones et al., 2022; Zadeh et al., 2022). Participants were recruited through surrogacy organisations, including Brilliant Beginnings, Circle Surrogacy, Growing Families and Family Equality, as well as CAFCASS (the body responsible for granting parental orders within the UK) and snowball sampling.

All participants had used a gestational surrogacy arrangement involving the use of an egg donor separate to the surrogate. Surrogacy arrangements took place across North America, Europe and Asia, with the United States being the most common location (13 fathers).

### *Interview procedure*

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by three trained researchers, either in person ( $n = 5$ ) or remotely via Skype or telephone ( $n = 16$ ). Participants received an information sheet and had the opportunity to ask questions before providing written informed consent. Each interview lasted approximately 2 hours and was audio-recorded and later transcribed with all identifying information removed.

### *Measures*

#### *Fathers' thoughts, feelings and approach to disclosing*

The semi-structured interview consisted of two sections: (1) parent–child relationships, children's adjustment and fathers' well-being; and (2) fathers' surrogacy experiences, disclosure of surrogacy and egg donation and life as a single father. The open-ended questions in the second half of the interview were informed by previous research exploring stay-at-home fathers' experiences of parenthood (Jones et al., 2021) and interviews with parents who used assisted reproduction (Ilioi et al., 2017). The section specifically on disclosure was analysed for the purpose of the present study. Questions included 'Have you spoken with [child] about how you made your family?' Depending on the father's response, follow-up questions included 'When do you think you might start having this conversation?' and 'How do you think you might explain it to them?' While all participants were asked similar questions, researchers used additional questions and prompts to explore responses in greater depth.

#### *Disclosure status*

Fathers level of disclosure was rated as disclosed (the father had told their child about using surrogacy and egg donation), partially disclosed (the father had started explaining part of the process but not all, e.g. the role of the surrogate but not the egg donor) or not disclosed (no explanation to the child of surrogacy or egg donation). Disclosure intention about the use of surrogacy and egg donation was rated as either plans to disclose or does not plan to disclose.

### *Analysis plan*

To explore how fathers discussed surrogacy and egg donation with their children, reflexive thematic analysis was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2021), with particular attention paid to the role of researcher positionality throughout the analytic process. Thematic analysis is a valuable method for interpreting individuals' experiences within their broader social contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2021), hence is suitable for exploring how being a single man may have influenced the fathers' thoughts and feelings about talking to their children about their surrogacy birth. Due to the interview questions focussing on whether the father intended to disclose, and if so, when and how, fathers' responses were coded with particular attention to these aspects, such that coding was both deductive and inductive. Transcripts were coded by the first author on a line-by-line basis. These initial

codes were then grouped into broader categories with any codes unrelated to the research questions excluded. The resulting codes were organised into themes and sub-themes, which were continually reviewed and revised with reference to the original transcripts and initial codes to ensure the final themes were grounded in the data.

## Results

### *Disclosure to child about route to parenthood*

All the fathers intended to disclose, and around a third had either disclosed (six fathers) or partially disclosed (one father).

Fathers' thoughts and feelings about disclosure to their child could be understood in relation to two overarching themes: 'personal considerations' and 'practical considerations'. The theme 'personal considerations' related to the fathers' beliefs about what was best or right for their child. 'practical considerations' as a theme encompassed the fathers' pragmatic reasoning about why they felt it made sense for them to disclose to their child. In line with the framework of analysing why fathers disclosed, how they disclosed and what they disclosed, within personal or practical considerations, fathers' responses were grouped into motivation, approach and content. These three common topic areas within the two main organising themes encapsulate nine further subthemes. The findings indicated that both ideological and practical considerations were significant for the fathers, but for different reasons.

### *Personal considerations*

All the fathers stated an intention to disclose their use of surrogacy to their child(ren) and a third of fathers had already started doing so. This organising theme pertained to the fathers' beliefs about *why* they wanted to or had disclosed, their ideas about *how* disclosure should best happen and their considerations about *what* they should explain to their child.

#### *Motivation: openness*

Some fathers explained how important it was to them that they were open with their child about how they were born, with some perceiving that this would encourage acceptance among their children of their surrogacy journey; one father said 'I'm just going to hopefully just be so transparent it's a non-issue to him'. Other fathers expressed pride about their route to parenthood and the lengths they went to start their family and this contributed to a desire to be open, with one father explaining that 'I'm gonna be very open because there is nothing to hide'. Other fathers simply indicated that they felt it is important for a child to know about their birth story, stating 'They have a right to know of their origins'.

#### *Motivation: teaching children about family diversity and acceptance*

Some fathers explained that they felt it was important and valuable to teach their child about family diversity and different routes to parenthood in general, and that this was one

aspect of disclosure. These fathers wanted their children to learn about different types of families and interact with a diverse range of families.

For some of the fathers, discussing family diversity was one route into beginning to tell their child their surrogacy story: 'we've talked that every family is different, and I say now some people have two mummies, some of have two daddies, some have one dad', whereas for other fathers, representing and showcasing family diversity was part of a broader desire to foster positive attitudes towards all types of families and different routes to parenthood; one father stated that 'I want her to see that there's loads of different families'.

### *Approach: waiting for the right time to tell*

Many of the fathers had very young children and, whilst they expressed that they intended to disclose to their child, they felt that there was a right time to do it and that their child was not yet at that stage, explaining that they would tell but 'Not until he's really old enough to understand it'. This is perhaps not surprising given the relatively young age of many of the children in the sample.

Perceptions of the 'right age' or 'right time' to tell varied between the fathers, though many indicated that during early childhood or school age was when they felt would be right for their child in terms of readiness to understand what surrogacy is. For example, one father said that 'When he's four or something he will understand it' and another father contemplated 'I think by 4, 5, years ... by about 5-years-old she'll understand fully what happened'.

### *Content: uncharted territory*

Some fathers expressed concerns about how they should approach the topic and that, as a single man who had used assisted reproduction, they felt there was little in the way of guidance about how to talk to their child about their parenthood journey, with one father confiding that 'I felt actually in uncharted territory a little bit about what's the best way'. Another father explained that he was sure he wished to disclose but did not have a clear plan yet of how the conversation would go; 'I'm not going to hide away from it, but it's how I do it, I don't know'. Some fathers were uncertain about how to describe the process of having their child; one father shared he wanted his child's birth story to not be about the scientific process only: 'I don't want to use the word lab, you know, I don't want it to be a test tube baby kind of thing'.

### *Content: mum's (not) the word*

For some fathers, the feeling of being in uncharted territory was related to not knowing how best to describe the surrogate and the egg donor. The sub-theme of 'Mum's (not) the word' highlights the difficulties some of the fathers expressed around what might be considered the right or appropriate terminology to describe the individuals involved in the process, considering that, on the one hand, their children are young and might find concepts such as an egg donor or surrogate hard to understand, yet on the other, names such as Mum or Mother are laden with social and cultural meaning. One father explained how he felt about using the term Mum when referring to the child's surrogate: 'For a long time I would say well it's a word

you should avoid because then it's not the same as a Mum'. Similarly, another father described how 'I don't want to call the surrogate as the mother because it's not the case'. These terms carried weight for the fathers and show how the absence of child-friendly terms for surrogates and egg donors can be experienced by fathers as challenging. Some fathers used the term 'Tummy Mummy' for the surrogate, elaborating that 'because that's where he grew'. Some fathers used the terms mother and surrogate interchangeably during the interview but used the first name of the surrogate when talking to their child; 'He knows obviously who the mum is, the surrogate, he knows the name'.

### *Practical considerations*

As opposed to addressing the fathers' beliefs and feelings about disclosure, this theme instead encapsulated the practical side of disclosure that the fathers spoke about: *why*, *how* and *what* they had or intended to disclose, and how this fitted with their everyday interactions and experiences of being a single father.

### *Motivation: hard to hide*

Some fathers anticipated their child would ask questions about whether they had a mother and therefore they would need to explain surrogacy to their child. Fathers of children who were beginning preschool or school anticipated their child will come in more frequent contact with families headed by a mother and a father: 'He is going to actually realise that he doesn't have a mummy and other people have mummies, and so that is probably one of the first things I'm expecting'. Other fathers said that their decision to tell was influenced by their child beginning to develop an understanding of pregnancy: '(She) came back from school a couple of weeks ago and her teacher's pregnant, and she came home, we were in the bedroom and we were reading, and she goes "did I come out of your tummy?"' Such accounts highlight how the children's social environment and interactions with others had encouraged or might encourage the children to ask their fathers about how their family began or why it might look different to other families. In this sense, the fathers described how it would not be practically feasible to avoid discussing the involvement of a surrogate, with one father stating plainly that 'It's also much more difficult for a single man to hide' when referring to the decision to disclose.

Some fathers also acknowledged that, as well as their child asking questions about their family structure, other people would also ask questions, including strangers. Fathers reported that some of these questions were directed to them in front of their child(ren), which also reinforced how their family differed from others to the child. For instance, in some cases strangers would ask the father where the child's mother was or whether the father was 'babysitting'. These experiences underpinned some fathers' sentiments that disclosure was more of an inevitability or necessity than a choice.

### *Approach: child-led*

Many fathers referred to strategies of disclosure that would be child-led, in that they often spoke about wanting to wait until their child started asking questions before beginning to tell them about their surrogacy story. Some fathers described themselves as waiting until

their child showed that they wanted to have more information, explaining how ‘I’m waiting for some clues to ... you know, some interest ... I will just have to wait another couple of years until the question will come’. This was the case for many fathers, some of whom stressed that they had given thought to how they would disclose and how to navigate disclosure conversations but wanted the initiation of these discussions to be in their child’s hands; ‘I want to be led organically by what he says’.

### *Approach: little by little: ‘seed planting’*

Fathers who had told their child expressed how disclosure was something that happened repeatedly, rather than being a one-off conversation: ‘It’s a bit like a legend where you have to tell it again and again’.

Some fathers articulated that it was important to tell the story in a child-friendly way; one father explained that he was ‘trying to distil it for a 2-year-old of describing that I really wanted to have a child and that I need two special women to help me do that’. Some fathers felt that explaining having used an egg donor was more complex than a surrogate at this stage of the children’s lives; one father said in relation to disclosing the egg donation: ‘nothing on that at the moment because I don’t think he could really kind of grasp that bit’. Fathers who had disclosed surrogacy but not egg donation explained that they intended to elaborate on different aspects of the child’s surrogacy story in line with their age and level of understanding.

### *Content: books and story time*

Many fathers had either disclosed or were planning to disclose their route to parenthood using books that described the process of surrogacy, or family diversity.

In some cases, fathers had created their own photobook explaining their surrogacy journey: ‘I have made a photo album of the people that helped conceive her, that bring her to life, like this picture of the egg donor’. One father explained how he was hoping to find books to further assist with telling the disclosure story that would be applicable for his family situation, ‘I was also looking for books of like, I know there are stories of kangaroos that explain surrogacy and things like this’.

One father described the plot of a storybook about single fathers using surrogacy, describing how he would use the book and tell the child ‘I’m a bird and there are two chicks in the nest and that’s us, and so we’re special too’. For some of the fathers, the use of these commercial and homemade aids resolved some of the concerns they had about how to tell the child.

## **Discussion**

This study offers a new understanding of single fathers’ thoughts and feelings about disclosing about their child’s origins. All the fathers intended to disclose or had started doing so. The findings show that fathers keep both personal and practical considerations in mind, and these feed through into their motivation to disclose, their approach to disclosure, and the content of these conversations. Many of the fathers had thought in great depth about their conversations with their child about their origins, yet a minority felt unsure about how best to share the information.

The findings from the present study reflect what is known about disclosure in other family types, to some extent. As with research on single mothers through sperm donation (Freeman et al., 2016) and gay couples who used surrogacy (Jadva et al., 2019), the fathers all intended to tell, and some had disclosed or begun the process of telling their child about their origins. For example, in Freeman et al.'s (2016) study of 31 single mothers by choice, all but one of the single mothers had disclosed or planned to disclose when their child was aged 4–8 years-old, with only one mother feeling unsure about whether to disclose.

A few of the fathers positioned disclosure as an opportunity for celebrating their family type, reflecting the 'proactive' (Carone et al., 2025) and 'engaged' (Goldberg et al., 2016) disclosure strategies previously conceptualised within research on lesbian and gay parents, intended to foster pride in different aspects of their family identity. This highlights that disclosure is not only an internal family process but reflects desire for parents to highlight the legitimacy of their family to others outside of the family. Indeed, many of the fathers highlighted how the transition to preschool or school would be a significant period of heightened visibility for their family and an opportunity for social comparison and questions to arise. For fathers who had not yet told their child, this was usually due to the age of the child, with some fathers suggesting that the age 4 or 5 years-old would be when they may be able to understand the process of a pregnancy. This aligns with research on adoption, where it has been suggested that it is during middle childhood that children who are adopted develop a fuller understanding of what adoption means (Brodzinsky, 2011).

In line with previous research outlining that heterosexual couples express some worries about aspects of disclosure (Golombok, 1997; MacDougall et al., 2007), some of the fathers in the present study also expressed similar concerns. Across the sample, the fathers' narratives revealed varying degrees of preparedness. The present study revealed that, for single fathers, explaining the role of both the surrogate and the egg donor added some complexity, as did the need to find suitable, child-friendly terms to describe the surrogate and donor. Given the ages of the children in the present study, disclosure was not imminent for some of the fathers, and for those who had begun to tell, they were more likely to have explained surrogacy but not egg donation, similar to studies of families headed by two fathers and heterosexual couples (Blake et al., 2016; Carone et al., 2018; Readings et al., 2011). Longitudinal research with single fathers on their disclosure conversations over time is needed to understand whether fathers have focussed on discussing the surrogate's role due to their child's relatively young age and related level of understanding or whether they intend for the surrogate to have a more prominent role in their family story than the egg donor. Follow-up studies will also provide a fuller understanding of whether fathers' intentions and expectations of disclosure play out in the long run; research on single mothers has found that, despite most mothers intending to disclose to their child at a young age (Freeman et al., 2016), in reality, this had not fully materialised when followed-up in middle-childhood (Zadeh et al., 2017).

Future research exploring the exact nature of disclosure conversations between fathers and their children will also inform knowledge of fathers' understanding of the different legal parameters associated with gamete donation and surrogacy. A study of heterosexual parents who used egg donation found almost a third of

the parents did not understand that they had used an identifiable egg donor to conceive (Lysons et al., 2022). Seeing as the fathers underwent fertility treatment in different countries with differing laws, future research would enable novel information on how the fathers discuss the details of egg donation with their children, including the type – such as known, identifiable, or anonymous, and what this means for their explanations to their children. In addition, it's important to reflect on the diversity of surrogacy; there are different forms it can take (Jadva, 2020), and it is yet to be understood whether the type of surrogacy arrangement (domestic or international) is discussed in families, and what children may think and feel about their surrogate and/or egg donor living in a different country to them (Zadeh & Jadva, 2024). It is also not understood how a commercial surrogacy arrangement may be explained, understood, or influence a child's feelings about their conception. Despite growing interest in this area of research, there is still much to be explored to understand the impact of the different ways that surrogacy is conducted (Jadva, 2020).

The present findings also reveal unique experiences for single fathers who are navigating the journey not only of parenthood, but of disclosure, alone. The fathers emphasised the role of resources and books, and the need for them to design their own books or photo albums due to a lack of appropriate materials for their family type. Based on these findings, the authors of the present study created a wordless story book designed as a free resource for single fathers – this book can be accessed via the corresponding author.

The present study has several limitations to note. Primarily, the sample size is small, and the fathers were financially comfortable, and many had the resources to pursue international surrogacy arrangements. This may not represent the larger population of single fathers who pursue parenthood alone. In addition, fathers who are comfortable talking about their route to parenthood through surrogacy and gamete donation are much more likely to volunteer to take part in such research, therefore this may over-represent fathers who had a positive experience, and those who have considered their disclosure approach.

An important avenue for future research will be exploring what the consequences of the fathers' approach to disclosure are for children regarding their understanding and psychological outcomes. Notably, research has shown that early disclosure is associated with more positive child outcomes (Illoji et al., 2017), mother–child relationship quality has been found to relate to children's feelings about their donor in single mother families (Zadeh et al., 2017) and gay fathers' through surrogacy attachment representations influenced their children's exploration of their origins (Carone et al., 2023). Thus, the family environment can influence children's understanding of, or acceptance of, their origins, and further asserts the need for greater understanding of disclosure outcomes in single father families.

The current findings are of relevance to family counsellors who may be supporting fathers going through the process of assisted reproduction. The findings suggest that counsellors might support fathers best by focussing discussions not on intentions to disclose but rather providing support with how to navigate disclosure conversations. Findings may also be useful to various organisations involved in supporting single fathers via assisted reproduction by providing insights into future resource provision.

Overall, the present study offers the first insight into disclosure in single father through surrogacy families. Largely due to the young age of the children in the sample, most fathers were in the process of thinking about how to talk about surrogacy and donor conception, rather than actively having these discussions with their children at present. Fathers' narratives evidenced both personal and practical considerations regarding disclosure. Fertility clinics, counsellors and researchers should continue to move away from the disclosure versus non-disclosure debate and instead explore how best to support parents in disclosing in a way that fosters children's understanding of surrogacy and/or donor conception and supports their feelings about their birth story.

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