

Participation in the Day of General Discussion

United Nations programmes and agencies are always invited to participate in the days of general discussion organised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Governments are also invited to attend and encouraged to participate actively. In light of the theme for the forthcoming day of general discussion, representatives of the private sector as well as International Financial Institutions are particularly encouraged to participate. The meeting will be open to the public, with information on participation distributed to United Nations programmes and agencies, NGOs and other interested individuals and organisations.

The meeting will be held during the 31st session of the Committee, at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Palais Wilson, Geneva), on Friday, 20 September 2002.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child invites written contributions on the issues and topics mentioned, within the framework outlined above. Contributions should be sent before 28 June 2002 (if possible in electronic version) to:
Secretariat of the Committee on the Rights of the Child
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNOG-OHCHR
CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland
e-mail: klucke.hchr@unog.ch or
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Young People's Art Exhibition

The annual YPArtE is coming up in October 2002 and aims to help young people who are isolated physically, mentally or geographically. The exhibition offers a forum for displaying both the creative work as well as the life experience of these young people. For information, contact D. Spence, Centre for Adolescent Health, 2 Gatehouse St, Parkville Victoria 3052; Tel: (03) 9345 6457; fax: (03) 9345 6502; web site: www.copas.net.au/cah/

No More Secrets : Donor Conception and Adoption

Sarah Armstrong is the Senior Manager of the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC), a service of The Benevolent Society. PARC has long involved itself in the debate on donor conception and sees many links between adoption and donor conception for all parties.

We have seen much in the media in recent months on the subject of donor conception and the secrecy vs openness debate. Should donors be identified? Should the numbers of children born as a result of a particular donor be restricted and tracked? Should children/ young adults born as a result of donor conception have the right to find out the identity of the donor and even have the option to meet them? What are the implications for the child's sense of identity and for the way they see their role within their family? What about the father that raised them – a non-biological relative but their father nonetheless. And the other father, the shadowy donor dad – can he have feelings for the child he may never see and will certainly never raise?

Complicated? Certainly, but not new. A decade ago we were experiencing similar fiery debate on the issue of rights to adoption information for adoptees and birth parents, which led to legislation broadly favouring openness across the Australian states. In NSW, the *Adoption Information Act* (1990) gave the right to contact each other and many thousands of reunions have occurred as a result. The fears of a threat to privacy, held by some sections of the community were largely without foundation. No person has been prosecuted for breaching the terms of a contact veto, for example, and the vast majority of birth relatives are respectful of the other party's situation, not wishing to cause distress.

There is much literature on the reasons for adoptees choosing to seek out, or consent to contact with, their birth relatives. Their identity

has shown itself to be made up partly by their upbringing within the adoptive family, partly by their own sense of who they are, but is also contributed to by their heredity – the genes that made them, the history of their birth parents. No person is entirely the product of their environment, convenient as that would be.

The experience of adoptees and donor offspring are different, but there are many parallels. Donor offspring are raised by one biological parent and are likely to see themselves reflected in that parent. They will hopefully know of their origins and will have some understanding of the process and how decisions were made. The reality is, however, that secrecy has been all too tempting for many families due to the anonymous donor system, the lack of access to records in most clinics and society's attitudes.

We've seen all this before. Adoptive parents were, from the 1970's, told that they must inform their adopted child of their origins. Yet, at PARC we frequently talk to adoptees from that period and earlier decades about their recent discovery that they were adopted. The impact of this discovery varies from the troubling to the earth-shattering. The late discovery of adoption has resulted in family breakdown, broken relationships, depression, anger and has a 'knock-on' effect for the adoptee's subsequent relationships. What's the point of trusting anyone if your own parents can lie to you about something as basic as who you are?

In a recent newspaper article, a young donor offspring, Geraldine Hewitt, talked about her need to know her donor and her family's struggle to get the clinic to release identifying information to her. In that same article, a nurse from the Royal Hospital for Women's fertility clinic said that parents of donor conceived children should have some options around secrecy as it can be more damaging to the child to have "distressing" or "unpleasant" information than to have no information at all. I fear that anybody watching me read this article would have seen my jaw hanging open in an ungainly manner. Has nothing been learnt from adoption and the damage caused by secrecy?

Workers in adoptions have worked since the 1980's to ensure that, wherever possible, there is ongoing contact between adopted children and their birth family. Open adoption means that, at a minimum, children can ask about the family that gave birth to them and many children come to know this family in an ongoing way. The NSW Department of Community Service's Post Order Support Service and those workers in similar roles in the private adoption agencies, spend the majority of their time working with adoptive and birth families on contact issues and in supporting adopted children to ask questions and cope with the answers they receive.

Yes, some of this information can be difficult or distressing, but agencies and families are surely there to be responsible for caring for children and supporting them to be able to talk about and live with information that is *theirs*. The other option is secrecy, with its inherent risks of discovery and its intention to deceive.

Children born as a result of reproductive technology are children who were desperately wanted by their parents. These couples would probably have had years of trying to conceive, would have experienced the pain of acknowledging their infertility, followed by extended periods of medical intervention. These are parents for whom their child is a blessing. Any difficult information that needs to be given to the child, therefore, has the backdrop of two loving parents and a history of care.

There is clear evidence that such information, if withheld, is considerably more difficult to deal with when the person to whom it pertains is in shock and believe their family to have deliberately kept the truth from them. The information then has a power of its own.

Difficult information given to children in these situations can be gently and skilfully related. Their parent's infertility is not an ugly issue; it is a fact and shows the strength of their parents to face difficulties and not succumb to them. Ignorance and secrecy do not provide such good role-modelling.

The debate about donors rages on. The donating of sperm, with its plethora of jokes and ribald comments, can no longer be something done repeatedly without thought and with no long-term consequences. Young donor offspring want to know that records of their donor have been maintained and that the clinic will be able to tell them the identity of their donor once they become an adult. They also want to know that clinics are able to put some restrictions on the numbers of children born as a result of each donor, therefore limiting the potential number of half siblings walking about in their community. These are real issues for this group of young Australians and, as such, they must be listened to.

Where clinics do require donors to be identified, as is the case in some private clinics, and in Victoria where there is a mandatory register for donors, there has not been the predicted rapid decline of donations. Western Australia also maintains a register, though the release of information has not been legislated, and South Australia and NSW are struggling to establish similar provisions. In Sweden, clinics have to keep identifying information which can be released to the young person when they reach the age of 18. Here too, the numbers of donors coming forward have not fallen.

Donors, it seems, are not put off by records being maintained or even the possibility of contact. They often donate for altruistic reasons and do feel a sense of interest and perhaps even some responsibility for the children born from their genes. This sense of responsibility is shared by those who have knowledge of the impact of being raised in a family coloured by adoption, permanent care or, we now know, donor conception. We can have the benefit of hindsight and can say with authority that when secrets are maintained, nobody wins.

You can contact PARC at PO Box 239 Bondi NSW 2026,
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email : sarahb@bensoc.asn.au

DCI Launches Social Legal Defence Centre Programme

Eight DCI Sections and Associate Members in Albania, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Colombia, Ghana, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Sri Lanka and Uganda, in co-ordination with the International Secretariat of DCI, have received a grant from the Dutch Government to set up social and legal defence centres for children and adolescents and to strengthen local initiatives, which respect children's rights in least developed and developing nations.

The focus of these centres will be empowering children and adolescents with information about their rights. They will provide direct legal aid and representation, information and social support and implement the Convention of the Rights of the Child on a local level. The centres will reach out to street children, children in prison, child soldiers, and children suffering from gender related violations. In addition to legal advice and representation, the Centres will provide information and expert advice to a broad audience including lawyers, other professionals such as social workers, probation officers, educators, non-government organisations and government officials including the Ministries of Social Affairs and Education working with children.

DCI will assist these groups in integrating children's rights and non-discrimination policies into their programmes and by fighting landmark cases that will set a precedent to change these policies and procedures. When necessary, these cases will be fought in the local courts and will be taken to the Supreme Court in order to give teeth to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and relevant International Standards concerning children. They will also work to increase awareness of and commitment to children's rights in the general community.

The global programme has been designed on the basis of experiences of DCI Sections and Associate Members in giving social and legal aid to children. The first four centres commenced in February in Colombia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Sri Lanka and Uganda. These pilot projects will be used as a model for the creation of additional centres in each region. Four more centres will be established in January 2003 in Bolivia, Albania, Bangladesh and Ghana.

For more information, contact: The DCI International Secretariat: dci-is@tiscalinet.ch