

101 ways to make A FAMILY

One mum, one dad and their biological, naturally conceived children... how retro! Kate Bussmann looks at today's multiple routes to parenthood

Photographs
VICTORIA LING

EVERY SO OFTEN, MELANIE THERNSTROM comes across someone who doesn't know what to make of her family. 'Who's the biological mother?' they'll ask when they learn that her three-year-old twins were brought into the world through a combination of surrogacy, donated eggs and her husband's sperm. An author with a razor-edged sense of humour, sometimes Melanie replies there is no biological mother. But it's not just the twins' conception that confuses people - it's their dates of birth. And no, that plural isn't a typo, because Violet and Kieran were carried by two different surrogates, and born five days apart. A friend christened them 'twiblings', and the term stuck.

'People will go, "You were in labour for *five days*?"' says Melanie, doing an impression of the stunned reaction she encounters. Here's how it worked: Melanie and her husband, Michael, impatient to start their family (understandably, after six failed rounds of IVF), decided to implant two embryos simultaneously to increase their chances of one of the two being successful. However, rather than take the risk of one surrogate having a twin pregnancy, they decided on two

embryos *and* two surrogates. Except both pregnancies were successful - hence the 'twiblings'.

'I was 44, and panicked about being an older mum, so wanted to have the best chance of a successful pregnancy,' explains Melanie. 'We thought probably only one would work, but they both did,' she laughs. It may sound bizarre on paper but, in practice, it's been remarkably unproblematic. All parties are on excellent terms, to the point where Violet's surrogate brought her family to stay with them last summer. As Melanie points out, 'When it's your life, these things that seem strange quickly become normal.'

NO MORE BABY RULES

Ever since the arrival of Louise Brown 25 years ago, the first IVF baby, heralded the birth of a new branch of scientific innovation, society's definition of what constitutes a family has begun to evolve. There are more permutations and combinations than anyone could have imagined. A survey by Netmums last year identified 35 different types of family, up from 27 a generation ago and 22 from the one before that. One in 111 families now



include gay or transgender parents. And that's before you include families like Melanie's, heterosexual ones built with the help of egg, sperm or embryo donors and surrogates.

'I'm constantly surprised by how many variations there are on having a child, the technologies available and the situations people get themselves into,' says Natalie Gamble, the first lawyer in the UK to specialise in fertility issues. 'Most weeks there will be something I haven't heard of. We never get to the point where the law has caught up with what's happening on the ground – there's always a new issue.'

But right now, our vocabulary at least is catching up fast. Neology is rife, particularly in surrogacy. The American term 'gestational carrier' (for the surrogate) may not have caught on over here, but 'intended parents' (meaning the ones who will take the baby home) has. 'Tummy mummy', a child-friendly term often used by adoptive parents to describe the birth mother, has also been appropriated. There's even a term for the relationship between the children of the surrogate and the intended parents: 'gestational siblings'. And it's very easy to unthinkingly cause offence by using inelegant language, as I did when I fumbled a question to one parent about how her baby was 'handed over' post birth. 'She was returned to her parents,' her mother chided.

You may also have heard of 'co-parents', people who aren't romantically involved, but choose to have a child together – there are websites devoted to helping them connect. In 'intra-partner egg sharing', which describes the increasingly common scenario when one partner of a female same-sex couple carries the other's egg, there are various options for how you describe those roles. They might be 'egg mum' and 'womb mum', or the 'genetic mother' and

the 'bearing or legal mother', since until the law intervenes, it's the person who gives birth who is legally recognised as the mother.

Then there are 'half-twins', like the kids of Doogie Howser MD (aka actor Neil Patrick Harris) and his partner, David Burtka, who pithily described them thus: 'Two eggs, two embryos, one of mine, one of his.' An alternative option for gay dads was pursued by Elton John and David Furnish, who both donated sperm so they wouldn't know who was Zachary's biological father (mixing sperm like this can't be done legally through a UK clinic). I've even heard of one (straight) couple who have what could be described as 'two-thirds-tripplings', although they just call them triplets. They used an egg donor and a surrogate to have twins and then fell pregnant naturally; the kids were born two months apart. Just *try* to beat that.

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

As many of the above examples show, it's in large part the gay community that's driving change, not just in pushing for equal rights for all non-biological parents, but in working out how to help kids understand their identity.

'Gay families are obviously different, so they are inevitably having those conversations with children and developing the language,' says Gamble, herself a gay parent. 'I think it's helping heterosexual couples deal with some of those issues, because they can see same-sex couples dealing with it in a positive way. We have experienced a real cultural shift, particularly with donor conception – 20 or 30 years ago, heterosexual couples were told it was best never to tell the child. Now everyone is encouraged to >>

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be open and treat it as a positive thing. It's a complete revolution in thinking.'

'It's going through the same cultural evolution that adoption did, where there's now a consensus that it isn't in the child's best interest for adoption to be hidden,' agrees Melanie. 'In 10 years' time I'm sure everyone will agree that it's healthy to be open about egg donation, too.'

Fiona O'Driscoll, 42, and her husband, Andrew, opted not just to be completely open from the start about the fact that their two children were carried by a surrogate, but to create a long-lasting bond with her. 'She's Auntie Kate to my kids,' says Fiona. 'I see her as much as I see my sister, and she has that status.' The two women met through the support and campaign group Surrogacy UK, and quickly became close. 'I was taken aback by how genuine it was,' says Fiona. 'It's a very straightforward relationship between all the members of our families. We spend a weekend together about four times a year, and catch up on the phone, as well.'

HANDLE WITH CARE

Of course, it's not always that smooth, and with more people involved, there's more potential for confusion and hurt feelings. 'In "collaborative reproduction" arrangements the most important thing is that everyone is absolutely clear about what they expect, and everyone is on the same page,' says Gamble. 'That might be done through counselling, or putting things in writing, although in the UK that's not legally binding. It's not down to the adults involved to agree who the parents are, it's down to the law.'

Perhaps counter-intuitively, it can be more problematic when the surrogate or donor is actually someone who's already very close, like a member of the family. Dr Peter Bowen-Simpkins, medical director of the London Women's Clinic, has reams of examples of intra-family requests. 'We had a man who was congenitally unable to produce sperm, and wanted his father's sperm to impregnate his wife,' he recalls. 'One of the first surrogacies I was concerned with was a woman who was born with functional ovaries but no uterus, and her mother carried the baby. Sisters often donate eggs, too. But very careful counselling has to be done. It sounds very nice when your sister says, "You can have my eggs", but the sister may later wish to interfere with the upbringing of the child, so we always make it plain that this is one of the worries.'

Gamble, however, says surrogacy disputes are rare. And of all the parents I spoke to, gay or straight, with donors or surrogacy, the stories were almost entirely positive. They're proud of forging their own version of 'normal', and more than one of them described the 'richness' that comes with having all those extra people in their lives. And

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often, they found that where the law was lacking, people were able to work around it.

Fiona O'Driscoll, for instance, reports that the hospital gave her a private room for the night when her daughter was born so she could be with her. And when her son was rushed into special care after an emergency C-section, the doctor treated them as the parents, though legally Kate and her husband had those rights. 'The doctor took a pragmatic approach,' says Fiona. 'The law is upside down, and it isn't right that someone who is in no way related to the child is legally responsible.'

While the law, science and semantics straggle behind, kids are on the front line of change in society, just as those with mixed race, divorced and lone parents were before them. In 2010, Stonewall published research into the experiences of children with gay parents. It showed they are as likely to be happy as any other, but that they have to explain their family to others, which makes them feel unusual. As a result, the charity launched their Different Families, Same Love schools campaign. 'It's about educating teachers to be inclusive so the onus isn't on the child - and not just about gay families, but someone with one parent, or adopted or living with grandparents or mums and dads on second marriages,' says Jacqueline Davies, Stonewall's chair.

'A generation ago, it was harder to be a child in an unusual family set-up,' adds Siobhan Freeguard, founder of Netmums. 'The fact that there are so many variations now has got to be a good thing for the child, because they're less marginalised. Our children are so much more accepting than we ever are. They may remark on it, but it's no big deal to them. We can learn something from them.'