

## Who's on the Family Tree? Now It's Complicated

Laura Ashmore and Jennifer Williams are sisters. After that, their relationship becomes more complex.

When Ms. Ashmore and her husband, Lee, learned a few years ago that they could not conceive a child, Ms. Williams stepped in and offered to become pregnant with a donor's sperm on behalf of the couple, and give birth to the child. The baby, Mallory, was born in September 2007 and adopted by Ms. Ashmore and her husband.

Then the sisters began to ponder: where would the little girl sit on the family tree?

"For medical purposes I am her mother," Ms. Williams said. "But I am also her aunt."

Many families are grappling with similar questions as a family tree today is beginning to look more like a tangled forest. Genealogists have long defined familial relations along bloodlines or marriage. But as the composition of families changes, so too has the notion of who gets a branch on the family tree.

Some families now organize their family tree into two separate histories: genetic and emotional. Some schools, where charting family history has traditionally been a classroom project, are now skipping the exercise altogether.

Adriana Murphy, a seventh-grade social studies teacher at the Green Acres School in Rockville, Md., said she asked students to write a story about an aspect of their family history instead. At Riverdale Country School in the Bronx, KC Cohen, a counselor, said the family tree had been mostly relegated to foreign language class, where students can practice saying "brother" or "sister" in French and Spanish.

"You have to be ready to have that conversation about surrogates, sperm donors and same-sex parents if you are going to teach the family tree in the classroom," Ms. Cohen said.

For the last six years, according to United States census data, there have been more unmarried households than married ones. And more same-sex couples are having children using surrogates or sperm donors or by adoption. The California Cryobank, one of the nation's largest sperm banks, said that about one-third of its clients in 2009 were lesbian couples, compared with 7 percent a decade earlier. Even birth certificate reporting is catching up. New questions are being phased in nationally on the standard birth certificate questionnaire about whether, and what type of, reproductive technology was used, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Tracing a family tree, though, is more than just an intellectual exercise. There are medical and legal implications, particularly when it comes to death and inheritance. Families, said Melinde Lutz Byrne, president of the [American Society of Genealogists](#), are mostly concerned with who inherits property when a biological relative dies.

Ms. Williams and her sister, though, had other issues to resolve. Ms. Williams, who has a lesbian partner, had a biological child, Jamison, 6, who was conceived through a sperm donor, too. And the sisters wondered how to describe the relationship between Mallory and Jamison, who are not only biological half-siblings, but also cousins. And where did the sperm donors fit in?

After months of discussion, they came to a resolution: "Mallory is my daughter and Jennifer is her aunt," said Ms. Ashmore, 38, who lives close to her sister near Minneapolis. At home, Jamison sometimes refers to Mallory as his sister. But at school, said Ms. Williams, 40, "she's his cousin." The sperm donors, they agreed, had no place on the family tree.

For some children, having to explain their family tree can be alienating.

“It can cause kids pain in unexpected ways,” said Peggy Gillespie, a founder of [Family Diversity Projects](#), a family education advisory group.

At Green Acres last year, Ms. Murphy said, two kindergartners were playing outside when a boy, the son of a single mother, told a classmate that he had an older sister. “You can’t have an older sister; you don’t have a dad,” Ms. Murphy recalled the girl saying. The boy protested; he said he knew his sperm donor, who had a daughter of his own.

Sue Stuever Battel and Bob Battel of Cass City, Mich., will soon have four children. The oldest, Addy, 8, was conceived naturally; Dori, 5, was conceived via a sperm donor. They are adopting two toddler boys. “All four of our kids are 100 percent in our family tree,” Ms. Battel said. “The genetic connection has never mattered.”

But the Battels understand that their children may have questions. So they have prepared two sets of baby books: one outlining life with the Battels, the other about each child’s birth parents. The children can choose which details they want to share.

Ms. Battel and her husband also debated whether to include other children born using their donor’s sperm. After all, those children would be biological half-siblings to Dori. Their verdict: “We decided they are not half-siblings, but donor siblings,” Ms. Battel said. “We honor them, but they are not part of the family.”

Jeannette Lofas, founder of [Stepfamily Foundation](#), a family counseling service based in New York City, eschews the traditional family tree for a network of circles (females) and squares (males), with dotted and straight lines to connect married and blood relatives. A live-in lover or nanny can be included, too, though with no connecting lines.

“That is how complex we have to think,” Ms. Lofas said.

Rob Okun, a 61-year-old magazine editor from Massachusetts, agreed to donate his sperm to a lesbian couple 16 years ago. Mr. Okun already had two biological children with a longtime female partner and two stepchildren with his current wife. He wanted no role in parenting the children born with his donated sperm, but did want them to know who he was.

The couple, Patricia Kogut and Lynne Dahlborg, agreed, and Ms. Kogut gave birth to Lucyna and Nathaniel. Ms. Dahlborg then adopted both children.

“There is the family tree and there is the day-to-day structure of the family,” Ms. Kogut said.

She described the family as having a “triple family tree” that included her, Ms. Dahlborg and Mr. Okun.

For a long time, though, Mr. Okun was uncomfortable with the connection, largely because his mother disapproved. It wasn’t until after her death in 2004 that he considered including the children in his tree. Now, he said, “I make no distinction between my biological and stepchildren.”

For now, Ms. Williams and her sister said they were happy that Mallory and Jamison shared a special bond. But what if one day the two children want to place themselves as brother and sister on their family tree?

“I think I’m fine,” Ms. Ashmore said, tentatively.

Then she added, “But we’ll have to think about it.”