

10 Ways to Have a Baby

From embryo adoption to sperm washing, making a baby is easier—and more complicated—than ever. Doree Shafrir on parenthood's new frontier.

Today's birth announcements come in all shapes and sizes. «Steve and Michael are Preggers!» «Sally, Maria, and Sebastian are Having Twins!» «It's an Adopted Frozen Embryo!»

We live in an age when the obsession with having a child has reached a fever pitch. Single men and women, and couples gay and straight, have more options than ever before—and they're taking advantage of every single one of them. The \$4 billion [fertility industry](#) has couples going to untold lengths to conceive, and has pushed pregnancy toward the realm of science fiction. People are adopting embryos that would have otherwise been used for stem-cell research, and HIV-infected sperm is being washed clean so it can fertilize an egg. (Whose egg? Maybe the 50-something single lesbian's.) There are [sperm banks](#) offering discounts to soldiers who want to store their sperm for their wives to impregnate themselves with in case they die overseas. And more and more often, close family members are acting as surrogates.

With the art of baby-making going from surrealist to abstract, The Daily Beast talked to couples (and singles) whose paths to parenthood were circuitous, but perhaps all the more touching for the length of the journey.

The Sister-in-Law Surrogate

Mindy Denney, a former TV news anchor, had a partial hysterectomy at 19 because of hemophilia in her family; she still had eggs, but no uterus. When she started thinking about having children, she turned to her sister-in-law, Gina, whom she'd known since junior high school. Over a bottle of wine, Mindy and her husband discussed it with Mindy's brother and Gina, and Gina agreed. «For three months she had to take huge progesterone shots in her back every day,» Mindy said of Gina's ordeal. «We had to get our cycles together.» Mindy's cycle had to be lined up with Gina's so that Gina's uterus would be ready to receive the eggs at the exact moment they were ready.

Diagnosing an Embryo

Mindy also knew she was a carrier for hemophilia—the reason she'd had the partial hysterectomy—and so her embryos underwent PGD, or preimplantation genetic diagnosis. «We had 13 embryos, with eight cells to each embryo. They'd pull one cell off at a time and send it to a clinic, and the clinic would test that one cell and send us back the paperwork and say this one has PGD, this one doesn't, etc. We only had 13 embryos in consideration.» Of course this raises the issue of genetic selection, as Mindy herself points out: «People say, oh, you decided not to have the hemophilia child.» She declined to say what happened to the rest of the embryos.

The first two clinics Mindy tried refused to work with her because of the genetic disease issues. The third, the Huntington Reproductive Clinic in Southern California, agreed. «The doctor said, I've never done anything like this before. Let's do it,» said Mindy.

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Adopting Her Own Son

After the embryo was successfully implanted in her sister-in-law—who was living in Austin, Texas—Mindy discovered, months later, that there was another potential wrinkle: She had to get a court order saying that she and her husband, not her sister-in-law and her brother, were the parents. «Otherwise, we would have had to adopt our own son,» she said. Today, Mindy's son Alec is a healthy 3 year old. But she and her husband know if they want to have more biological children they'll have to find a new surrogate: While she was pregnant with Alec, Gina developed the anti-E antibody, a [condition](#) that can result when a mother's blood type is incompatible with her child's. As a result, Gina is unable to carry any more children as a surrogate, though she can still have more of her own biological children.

Sperm Washing

Today, even a man who's HIV-positive can conceive with relative safety—he just needs to get his sperm washed first. Dr. Ann Kiessling, a researcher at Harvard Medical School and the founder of the Bedford Stem Cell Research Foundation, pioneered the use of so-called sperm washing in the United States. Sperm washing can be used when a man with HIV wants his own biological child but wants to be sure he doesn't pass along the virus.

The process foregoes soap and water, and skips right to the spin cycle. Sperm is spun in a centrifuge and the healthy, presumably non-HIV-infected sperm are the ones that are left in the center. The healthy sperm are then fertilized using IVF or through the «cup» insemination method. According to Kiessling, 101 babies in the U.S. have been born using this method since 1998. «We were going to have a big party when we got to 100, but we realized that most people who have gone through this don't want people to know who they are,» she said. «There are quite a number of pregnancies ongoing now.»

At first, she said, she had trouble finding fertility specialists who were willing to work with sperm that had been «washed.» «Vladimir Troche, who runs a fertility program in Arizona, was the very first to step forward and said, I'll help you with these people. After he started, other programs had started.» Sperm washing can also be used by men with hepatitis B, which, according to Kiessling, is «one of the few viruses that can infect the developing embryo.»

Claiming a Frozen Embryo

Monica, a 38-year-old woman living with her husband Gary outside of Philadelphia, is pregnant with her first child. But the baby won't share any genetic material with either her or her husband. That's because she adopted the frozen leftover embryos of a Milwaukee woman who had undergone fertility treatments. Many women who undergo IVF either discard their leftover embryos or donate them for stem-cell research. But some IVF users—especially Christian ones—believe that life begins at conception and refuse to destroy or donate their leftover embryos. Instead, they pay to keep them frozen and, in a process that has become similar to adopting a child, wait for the right person to come along to adopt the embryo. The resulting children have come to be called [snowflake babies](#).

Monica went through an agency called [Embryos Alive](#), which has been run by a Cincinnati woman named Bonnie Bernard since September 2003. Bernard matches leftover embryos with women like Monica; the embryo donors must approve each adoption. «On her Web site there's a list of the anonymous donors—what they look like and what they're looking for, and how many embryos they have,» Monica explained. «It also says what the mother and father's backgrounds are, and what faith or religious beliefs they have.» The couple she chose to adopt her embryos «was perfect,» says Monica. «They fit

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what we look like and our Christian beliefs, and they wanted a closed adoption.”

Monica and Gary had to submit a background check, birth certificates, baptismal records, deed to their house, health-insurance cards, proof of life insurance, and information about the neighborhood they lived in, as well as three letters of recommendation. Bernard’s fee for everything was \$3,200.

The Adoptee’s Adoption

When it came time for the embryos to actually be transferred, however, Monica hit an unexpected snag: The father of the donated embryos was himself adopted, and had incomplete medical records. Several fertility clinics they contacted refused to do the transfer because of his unknown medical background. «They were afraid they would contaminate the other embryos,» said Monica. She finally found a clinic in Delaware that would do the transfer, for which she paid \$3,500. Despite these fees, Monica said, embryo adoption «was the most affordable way to go about having my own child.» She’s due two days after Christmas.

The Divorcees’ Conception

Dr. John Jain, who founded the [Santa Monica Fertility Specialists](#) clinic, recalls one patient who had frozen her eggs at age 40 when it seemed that she and her husband would divorce. One year later, at age 41, they reconciled, and the couple came back to Jain’s clinic for IVF after she had had a miscarriage. «Miscarriages at that age are related to chromosomal abnormalities—the egg gives rise to genetically abnormal embryos,» said Jain. At that point, he said, the patient decided to use her frozen eggs. «I decided to do [ZIFT](#) (zygote intrafallopian transfer). I put the eggs in her Fallopian tubes. This was a woman who was in her forties and likelihood of pregnancy through any standard in vitro fertilization method is poor. She’d already had a miscar-

riage, which showed eggs were on downward side of quality.» ZIFT is a laproscopic surgery performed under general anesthesia. Through ZIFT, the woman ended up with a healthy baby.

Seeking Single Motherhood

[Staceyann Chin](#), a lesbian author, poet, and activist, is working on a documentary called *Baby Makes Me* with the filmmaker Tiona McClodden about attempting to become a single mother. The documentary, which will begin shooting soon, will also explore other women’s nontraditional paths to become mothers. «Even if I did have a kid with a partner, I’d be making the choice to have a child who will grow up without a father,» said Chin, who has started visiting sperm banks to explore her options. «This whole idea of choosing a kid—when you go to buy sperm, you have Chinese sperm, black sperm, white sperm. You can pay extra to look at a picture of the donor as a baby, to see what your baby might look like.»

Chin, who grew up in Jamaica of African and Chinese ancestry, said that embarking on this quest has also raised difficult questions about race. «I had this idea that I’d like to have a kid that looks like me,» she said. «When you have a kid, you think, ‘My child is going to look like me and my boyfriend.’ So that we all look like a family, if i was with another black woman I would choose black sperm. When you don’t have that in mind when you’re going solo, it’s an eeny miney mo setup. You get to manipulate the race of your kid.»

Making Other People’s Babies

Rick Dillwood and his wife, Amelia, who have been married for seven years, don’t have children themselves, and have no plans to. But there will be five children who owe their existence to the two of them. Several months ago, Dillwood, a 29-year-old grad student in North Carolina, donated sperm to his friends, a lesbian couple named Melanie and Karen,

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who used to be his neighbors. Their baby, a girl, is due in November. And before Amelia, who is now 34, met Rick, she had donated eggs. «So there are four children in the world who share my wife's genetic material who she has no contact with,» said Dillwood. «Those kids can contact her when they're old enough. I think part of the reason that Melanie and Karen approached us is because they realized we were into the idea that we didn't want to be responsible for our biological children.»

Before Dillwood handed over his sperm, Melanie and Karen drafted a contract stipulating that he knows why he's doing this and what it will lead to. «I have no say in anything about the child,» said Dillwood. «I'm not responsible financially in any way for the child.» Dillwood said he's not telling his parents about his daughter until the so-called second family adoption goes through. «A couple years ago, my mom said, 'Do you think you're ever going to have kids?' And I said, 'I don't think.' My parents are pretty traditional, and I could tell that didn't make any logical sense to her. So now I'm going to tell her that not only am I not going to have kids, but I'm giving kids to someone else.»

Dillwood made a 10-minute film about his experience called [How to Make a Heartbeat](#) that screened at the Austin Gay and Lesbian Film Festival last week. His parents, he said, don't know about the documentary, either.

The Homeless Fetus

Dan Savage, editor of the Seattle alt-weekly *The Stranger* and the writer of the *Savage Love* sex advice column, adopted his son D.J. from a homeless woman before the child was even born. Savage has written extensively about D.J.'s adoption in two books: [The Kid: What Happened After My Boyfriend and I Decided to Go Get Pregnant](#) and [The Commitment: Love, Sex, Marriage and My Family](#). D.J.'s birth mother, whom Savage calls Melissa in his writing, was an inconsistent presence in his life in his early years; there was a period of about a year and a

half where Savage thought she was dead. But today they see her about once a year. «She's no longer homeless,» said Savage. «She's settled a little more than she used to be. The thing that's complicated now is that it takes them a little time to warm up to each other. D.J.'s shy and so is his mom.»

Savage was quick to clarify reports that labeled Melissa a drug addict. «She was using drugs and alcohol in recreational quantities when she got pregnant. The minute she found out she was pregnant, she stopped.»

Nine months after D.J. was born, his father showed up. «Then he disappeared and we never heard from him again.» Today, Savage is in touch with his son's step-grandmother (his biological grandfather's wife), and says that no one knows where D.J.'s father is; he does know that «D.J. has a half sibling out there somewhere.»

Savage and his partner Terry were the first gay couple to adopt a child at the agency they used, Open Adoption & Family Services in Portland, Oregon. «Now half the people they work with are gay,» he said.

Doree Shafrir has contributed to The New York Observer, The New Yorker, Slate, and The Awl, and is the co-author of [Love, Mom](#). She is a former editor at Gawker. Her Web site is www.doreeshafrir.com.

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