

Women rush online to find 'co-parent'



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The traditional family is dead. Or at least it is for the tens of thousands of people who are choosing to go online to find the parent of their child.

Men and women are finding each other on what look like dating sites in order to have a baby through artificial insemination (AI). Within a platonic relationship, they then share the child without a binding legal agreement.

Co-Parents.co.uk, was begun by Franz Sof in 2008 when he wanted to meet someone he could bring up a child with. The site now has 10,000 members. This website and others like it also caters for those who, rather than looking for someone to "co-parent" with, are looking for a sperm donor, but want to meet him first.

In 2006, Jenny Kearns and her partner were trying to find a donor they could personally vet when she set up Co-ParentMatch.com, which has more than 20,000 members.

PollenTree.com was launched by Patrick Harrison and his wife Rita, both lawyers, in 2011 after they discovered that one of their female friends was "looking for a sperm donor by going to night clubs". They now boast 120 "Pollen Tree babies" conceived through matches made on the website.

The three websites report that more than 30 per cent of those who join are looking to co-parent while the rest are looking for, or to become, sperm donors.

"For women, co-parenting is mostly a second-best option," Mr Harrison said. "Either they haven't found the so-called Mr Right or a relationship they have had is ended."

The lawyer described how members of his website meet after finding each other online and decide whether to go forward with bringing up a child together. The websites, which attract single men and women as well as gay couples looking for a third parent, are designed like dating websites with members uploading what they are looking for, or willing to provide. Users can browse through all the profiles and send private messages when they think they have a match.

One woman, describing her decision to join, said: "I'm a 33-year-old single woman, I've worked with children for a long time now and I've been a foster carer for just under a year for babies and it's really made me broody. I always thought I'd be married before having children but that's not happened and I feel I'm running out of time."

Another said: "I would love children, and think I can give a baby a happy and fulfilling life. However, for various reasons, I haven't found the right man for me. This seems like a good option before I get too old and my fertility drops. I have thought about this option or a year now and, after talking with friends, I've decided to sign up and see what happens."

Legally, the father will have no rights over the child if AI is carried out through the NHS or in a private licensed clinic. Both parents, however, have equal rights if a home insemination kit is used, something these websites offer their members.

A written agreement can be drawn up, to indicate intentions to courts later if there are problems, but it is not legally binding.

Mr Harrison said he kept a vigilant watch over his website, blocking any user who appeared to be exploiting the system. "We take it very seriously because of the nature of what we do," he said. "Every person who joins is vetted; anyone causing suspicion is banned."

Mr Harrison said there was a "spectrum" of co-parenting, ranging from two fully committed parents in a platonic arrangement who shared the child in separate households to donors who had only occasional involvement with the child.

Simon Watson, 40, is a full-time sperm donor who has fathered more than 500 children in 15 years, and sees some regularly. "I've made three women pregnant in the past 10 days and four more since the end of November," he said. "The first lady couple I donated to privately I have a close relationship with and often go and see the boy, who is nine now." With others, he takes part in birthdays and with one woman who lives near by, he takes his own daughter along too so that the half-siblings can play together.

"It's still a niche decision," Mr Harrison said. "But it's growing every month. There isn't just one way of having a family any more."

The arrangement has its critics, with Harry Benson, the research director at Marriage Foundation, saying that it is "spectacularly selfish to time-share a child like some designer appendage". He said the child would "end up confused about their identity, attachments and relationships".

'A chance to fulfil my dream'

Case study

Sabrina Morgan was 26 when she found Kam Wong, who was 34, on an online fertility forum ten years ago. Both were gay but wanted to co-parent a child. Although it took Ms Morgan six years to conceive, the pair now have a girl together. She lives with Ms Morgan and her partner while Mr Wong visits weekly and is saving for her education.

Mr Wong said: "I adore children. The desire to have my own has always been with me. Because of my sexuality I thought it might never happen. The urge grew stronger in my thirties until one day I researched options. When I met Sabrina I was very nervous. This was my chance to fulfil my dreams."

Ms Morgan said: "We selected a partner on an intellectual level. Most couples rely on that gut reaction of finding someone attractive. We didn't choose on an aesthetic level. It was about carefully selecting someone based on long-term qualities. If couples separate, they have to renegotiate boundaries around access to children. We already have those things worked out."

People using co-parenting websites share the child without a binding legal agreement and within a platonic relationship
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