

OUR DAD'S A DONOR

Il she knew was this: that her father was Donor 1096. So how, asks Charles Laurence, did a young American girl track down the siblings she longed for?

Maddison Walker is 10 years old. She's bright and energetic, she loves baseball - and she's an only child. She also knows that she was born to her mother, Mara Walker, 43, with the help of a sperm donor. So when, while watching a television show about a website set up to connect children related through sperm-bank donors, she said, "I want to know if I have a brother or a sister", her mother took her seriously.

They posted a simple notice on the website: "Donor 1096, baby girl."

The results of Maddison's search bore fruit a week ago when she met her half-siblings Jonah and Hilit Jacobson, eight-year-old twins. Maddison, from Valencia, near Los Angeles in California, and Jonah and Hilit from Atlanta, Georgia, flew to New York to meet in Central Park, the first "sperm-bank siblings" ever to get together in such a way.

To their respective parents, the resemblances were obvious: their colouring, the shape of their chins, the shape of their lips, the line of their eyebrows, and the habit shared by all three of nervously chewing their fingernails.

"They even had the same energy, the same spirits, all three of them. It was obviously coming from donor genes," says Mrs Terri Jacobson, 40, who is the mother of Jonah and Hilit.

For Jonah: "It was cool, it was fun. We liked the same things - baseball, jumping on beds, that kind of stuff."

The parents, back home now with their children, are reflecting on what they have done. The one thing they all agree on is that they have broken new ground by becoming the first to bring together children genetically related through the pure coincidence of sperm-bank selection.

"It's a very weird situation. At first I was very uncomfortable with it," says Mrs Walker, who conceived as a single woman and met her husband several years later.

Jonah and Hilit's father, Eric Jacobson, 41, whose low sperm count had led him and his wife to the California Cryobank, says: "It was an amazing event, it truly was groundbreaking. The bonding that took place between these children was so fast. It was as if they had been together for years. I am sure we did the right thing."

Donors who give sperm to the almost 100 cryobanks operating in America are anonymous, although the laws covering the growing medical practice vary from state to state. Most, for instance, allow the release of genetic information essential to medical records. But the identity of the donor is kept secret, partly to protect him from possible legal action such as demands for child support, and to protect the mother from any legal action a donor could take on deciding that he wants some form of custody of his genetic child.

Three years ago, however, a nine-year-old child of a sperm donor, Ryan Kramer, decided to create a website that might help him to find his genetic father, or at least to discover whether he had any siblings.

"My mother and I one day had an idea to begin a website where different donor children, and possibly sperm donors, could go and share their information," says Ryan. Mother and son started donorsiblingregistry.com. It was while watching Ryan talk about his idea on The Oprah Winfrey Show that Maddison decided that she wanted to know if she had half-siblings.

"At first I was horrified," says Maddison's mother. "I thought, 'Oh my, she must be feeling insecure. There must be a problem.' " But her husband, Philip, pointed out that Maddison was an only child, and that only children often crave siblings. When they posted their notice in search of information on Donor 1096 the response was swift. "The next morning I get an e-mail back from Terri.

I couldn't believe it. It was scary," says Mrs Walker. "I thought Terri seemed so keen to meet that they must want something from us. Were her kids sick? Did they want something medical?"

"In fact, Mrs Jacobson had found the website before Mrs Walker, and used it to post a request to contact Donor 1096. She wanted another "vial" because she was thinking of having a second baby and had decided that if she did, it should have the same genetic father. That is how she spotted Mrs Walker's message.

During the summer, the families exchanged notes and photographs.

The children sent each other postcards from their summer camps.

"As we all gathered, there was a panic moment, but after the children plucked up their courage and met, I felt completely vindicated. My children have known about their origins from the start and we have always pursued a policy of complete honesty, and that prepared them for this next step," says Mrs Jacobson.

Perhaps because sperm-donor selection has something in common with the more traditional selection of mates, the families discovered that they had an extraordinary amount in common. Mrs Jacobson, for instance, is a teacher, as was Mrs Walker. Both women describe their husbands as being even-tempered and devoted fathers. Both mothers had chosen Donor 1096 for almost identical reasons.

"Top of my list was that he had to be Jewish so we all shared a family and ethnic background," says Mrs Jacobson. Mrs Walker said: "My donor had to be Russian-Jewish, like me. He had to have dark hair and green eyes, because that way my baby would be most likely to look like me, which is a vanity you can have conceiving as a single mother. He had to be smart, and he had to be athletic."

Mrs Jacobson believes from information gathered when dealing with the sperm bank that Jonah and Hilit may have at least two more half-siblings somewhere in America.

"It would be wonderful to find them, too. People have to realise that these days, kids come to families from a variety of places. There are adoptions, second families, sperm-donor children, there are so many non-traditional families out there now and I think it would be wonderful if there were 20 people who were half-siblings with the same donor genes," says Mrs Jacobson.

"What does family mean? It can mean making these connections in our frenetic times."

The idea, however, horrifies Mrs Walker. She says: "I think this is enough. If there are more related to Maddy, I don't think we want to know." The families are planning to keep in touch. Their first meeting at the boating lake in Central Park was sponsored by the ABC television network, contacted through the donor sibling website. Now, the Jacobsons are planning a trip to California.

The children have formed their own ideas of their unusual half-sibling bonds, and they are not quite what might have been expected. "I don't really think of Maddy as my sister. More like a new friend," says Jonah. And his sister, Hilit, says: "I really wanted to go to see what Maddy looked like, whether she looked like me. Then I was kinda nervous, but I'm glad we did it. I've seen her now. But I guess I'd like to see her again."

Mrs Walker was surprised to find Maddison cooling off when they returned to Atlanta. She hadn't liked New York, she said, it was too crowded.

But what of the meeting with the brother and sister she had so wanted to exist? "It was OK," she says. "I like them. But it is not like they are really family, because I can't see them whenever I want."

That puzzled her mother. "She must be detaching herself, so she doesn't have to think about it," says Mrs Walker.

But perhaps it shows that bonds between genetic siblings have to be nurtured, rather than simply created.