

Actually, these days, first comes the BABY CARRIAGE

By Amy Harmon
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When Diane Carr turned 37 with a compelling desire to have a baby and no true love with whom to have one, she began, gingerly, to explore the other option she had filed in the back of her mind.

Like other single women who have found themselves sifting through online profiles of anonymous sperm donors recently, Carr, a real estate broker in Atlanta, was quickly convinced that buying sperm was the easiest way to have a baby without a partner. She also concluded that it has quietly become a socially acceptable choice, if only because so many are making it.

Carr's hairdresser, it turned out, knew someone who had just conceived that way, as did one of her own clients. An Atlanta chapter of a national support group for single mothers by choice formed two years ago and had 26 members.

On the Internet, Carr discovered hundreds of pregnant single women trading notes. Some were arranging to send others their leftover sperm.

"Five years ago, you never heard about this," said Carr, who recently had the insemination procedure performed. "Now you can talk about it, and it's OK."

In her effort to become a lone parent, Carr has plenty of company. The support group she joined is 25 years old, but it has grown to 24 chapters around the country from 12 in the last three years. About three-quarters of its 4,000 members used sperm donors. Sperm banks, which once catered largely to infertile and lesbian couples, are seeing a surge in business from single women, as are obstetricians who perform artificial inseminations.

The groundswell of single women deliberately having babies reflects their increased ability to support a family. It helps, too, that the Internet has done away with the need to leave the house to find a donor. A woman can now select the father of her child from her living room and have his sperm sent directly to her doctor. It is faster and cheaper than adoption, and it allows women to bear their own genetic offspring.

Single women have always found adoption rules more restrictive than they are even for gay couples. Many hesitate to simply have a sexual fling or use a "known donor" for fear that the father may someday stake a claim to the child. But thousands are now gravitating to sperm bank Web sites, where donor profiles can be sorted by medical history, ethnic background and a wide range of physical characteristics.

Like an online dating service where no one ever dates, written answers are given to questions like "What is the funniest thing that ever happened to you?" Some women screen for men with no cancer in their family. Some look for signs of high IQ. Some search for a man who might have been their soul mate. Others are more pragmatic.

"You're paying for it, so you kind of want the best of the best," said Anna Aiello, 38, of Moriches, N.Y., on Long Island, the mother of 1-year-old twins, who saw her ability to select a 6-foot-2-inch blond, blue-eyed, genetic-disease-free donor as some consolation for not getting to fall in love with someone who would most likely have been more flawed.



Diane Carr, 37, injects herself with Follistim, a drug that stimulates ovulation. Carr, who is single, is preparing to get pregnant through artificial insemination and plans to raise the child on her own. Through a support group and online forums, she discovered she was not alone in her decision.

Prices at sperm banks range from about \$150 to \$600 per vial, plus shipping. At some banks, customers can pay extra for a donor's childhood photograph, or a tape recording of his voice. Fairfax Cryobank, one of the largest, charges more for donors who have doctorates. Single women, sperm banks say, are also driving demand for donors who agree to release their identity when children conceived with their sperm turn 18.

"A lot of times couples feel, 'This is our family and we don't want any external information,'" said Holly Fowler, marketing director for Xytex Sperm Bank, where sales of sperm from "ID release" donors have jumped 20 percent since the option was introduced in 2002. "But single mothers want their child to be able to have an understanding of where they came from."

Veteran "choice moms" say more single women are now trying to conceive in their mid-30s rather than waiting. Because they are starting before their fertility declines, they are having more success. Some are even having second children.

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"It's not necessarily Plan B anymore; it's just the plan," said Melissa Singer, 46, a member of Single Mothers by Choice, a national support group, who had a daughter through donor insemination 10 years ago. "It means there's a lot less desperation as a whole in the group."

When she was pregnant, she rarely told people how she had gotten that way, Singer said, because she did not want them to feel sorry for her. Other single women pretended to have had a chance sexual encounter. But the new wave of donor

-inseminated mothers are not hiding; they have even been portrayed on two TV shows, "Misconceptions," a WB sitcom, and "Inconceivable," an NBC drama.

No one tracks the number of women who actively choose single motherhood, but their ranks, while still small, seem to be increasing quickly. According to 2004 US data, about 150,000 women with college degrees have children under 18, have never been married and are the only adult in their households, triple the number recorded in 1990. Family sociologists say women in that group are likely to be single by choice, not chance.

"Women who order sperm are engaged in a kind of agency that is new and is gaining momentum," said Rosanna Hertz, a sociologist at Wellesley College who is working on a book called "When Baby Makes Two." "It's different from women who adopt, who are not breaking sexual norms."

Historically, far fewer women with high incomes and college educations have had children out of wedlock than those with less money and schooling. But some high-achieving women may be shifting their behavior based on the lessons of a generation that precedes them.

Professional women in their 50s regret not having had a child far more than not having gotten married, said Sylvia Ann Hewlett, an economist whose 2002 book "Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children" found that more than a third of women with high-status jobs were childless at 40.

"When push came to shove, the child was more important than the partner," Hewlett said of the women she interviewed. "It was an ever-present source of regret, where they were not so actively mourning the absence of a husband."

The boom in high-tech fertility treatments for women over 35 has raised women's awareness of the limitations both of their bodies and their demographic. But some women in their 30s who have seen friends divorced or in unhappy marriages say they are not willing to settle for "Mr. Almost Right" to have a baby.

Carr said she found herself waiting impatiently through the beginnings of relationships, acutely aware of her biological deadline. "What a difference dating is when you don't need them for that," she said.

Carr's mother was initially skeptical: "It's not like a puppy; you can't give it back," Mary Gordon told her daughter, reminding Carr of the dog she had deposited at her parents' house after graduating from college.

"Mom," said Carr, who has long owned another dog, "I have a home and two cars. I know what I'm doing."

Even so, the decision was bittersweet.

"I was so sad because I didn't want to have to do it this way," Carr said. "But in the same breath I was so happy that I had the choice."

Many single women still find the choice to get pregnant met with prehension or even hostility from friends, family and some strangers. The most common accusation is that they are selfish, because of the widely held belief that two-parent homes are best for children.

"I had one psychologist friend actually suggest that I 'channel' my (neurotic?) need to parent into volunteer work in a children's hospital," wrote one mother on a support group Web site. "Can you say 'condescending'?"

Mothers who choose their solo status say the problems that have traditionally burdened families headed by a single mother -- poverty, abandonment by fathers, teenage motherhood, parental conflict -- do not apply to them.

But some suspect that what makes people uneasy is not their status as single mothers but that they achieved it by short-circuiting the traditional act of procreation. Experts on nontraditional families say the use of anonymous donors without a more conventional reason, like infertility or homosexuality, may seem more threatening to men's role in the family.

Hertz, the Wellesley sociologist, said that while nearly all the single-mothers-by-choice she studied actively tried to incorporate men into their children's lives, their presence was seen more as an enrichment activity, like piano lessons or summer camp, than a necessity.

Some single mothers do relish their autonomy, which they say can more than compensate for not having a partner to help change the diapers. Every decision, from what to name their children to how to discipline them, is theirs to make without negotiation.

“Some single mothers do relish their autonomy”

"Even though it's only you, it really is only you," said Stacia Snapp, 43, of Woodinville, Wash., a technical writer for Microsoft who had two children with her ex-husband and used a sperm donor to have two more on her own. "It's really hard to balance when you have someone who disagrees with what you want to do. You're trying to be a good mom; you're trying to be a good wife; you don't feel understood by anybody."

Debra Taras, a psychologist in Philadelphia, would have liked to attempt that balance. But she was also acutely aware that she might not get the chance. "I don't know a way to say this that doesn't sound conceited, but when you're at the top of your field, the pool of available men is pretty small," said Taras, who bought herself some sperm for her 35th birthday. "You're looking to date an equal, and men are looking down, not across."

When her daughter, Olivia, cried much of the first few months, Taras' image of a blissful existence in a mother-daughter cocoon was hastily revised. She hired a live-in au pair and welcomed the attention of an older couple in her apartment building who have become Olivia's de facto godparents.

Taras, who has her own practice, says the weight of knowing that there is no one to fall back on financially can be stressful. But she has never had regrets. Now 23 months, Olivia is a chatty toddler who loves the merry-go-round.

"I could not have imagined my life without being a mother," Taras said. "This wasn't a hard decision for me. For me it was an absolute."