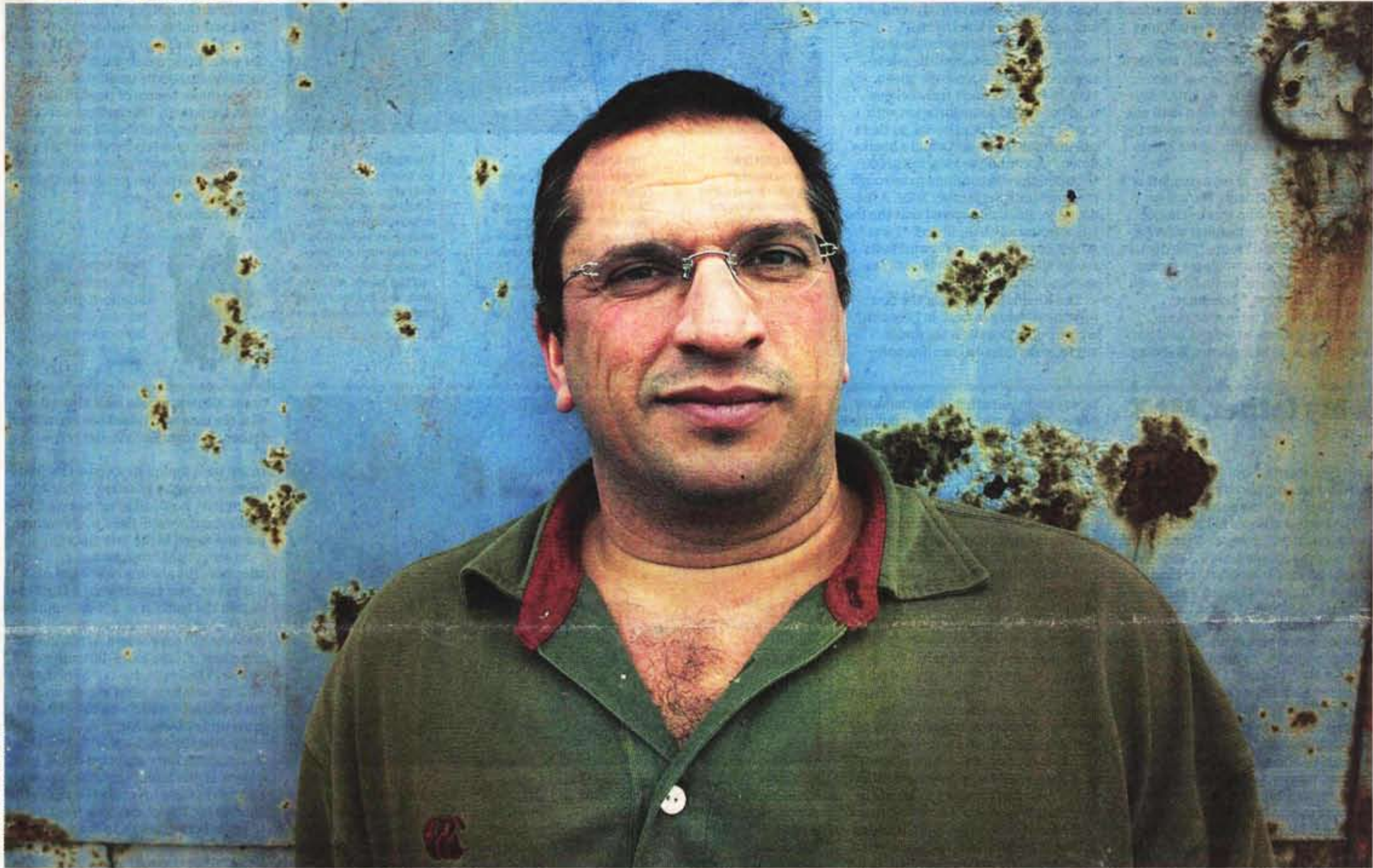




family



Ted is 60, and still loved. Why kids need fewer toys » Page 4



My father, Mr X

Shaun's was a one-night stand, Stella's a sperm donor, Tracy-Ann's a mystery. What difference does it make when you don't know who your father is? By **Kate Hilpern**

It was at her aunt's 90th birthday party in 2004 when Stella Kinrick discovered the truth about her father. "My aunt said she couldn't stand carrying the secret any longer and had I never wondered why I don't look remotely like my brother. We were, she explained, both born as a result of sperm donors, and our father was not in fact our father at all," explains Stella, 52.

Stunned, Stella confronted her mother. "My father had died when I was 22 and so I asked exactly when she had planned to tell me. Her answer was simple: never."

Friends tell Stella that having no information about her true paternity shouldn't make any difference to who she is, "especially at my age". "But it makes all the difference in the world," she insists. "I don't know anything about one whole side of me. I've been diagnosed with skin cancer, which I've been told is probably genetic, and I wonder what else I've inherited from him. Do I have half-siblings out there? Does my love of music and writing come from my father's side? Could I be Eastern European or even Jewish, since I know that many of the donors

back then were Eastern European Jewish doctors? Some of these questions impact on my own children."

Most of us take it for granted who our father is, but for many people – whether they're donor-conceived, adopted, born as a result of a brief relationship or for a host of other reasons – there is scant, if any, information available. Worse still, there is little hope of finding any.

Kate Trench, a psychodynamic counsellor, many of whose clients lack knowledge about their father, says it's common for such people to feel unsettled and ill at ease with themselves, often for their entire lives. It all comes down to an unfulfilled sense of identity, she explains. "Our identities are multifaceted and are made up of ethnic identity, social identity, sexual identity and cultural identity, just to name a few. Not having a father can impact on every one of these things," she says.

This is often coupled with an unresolved sense of loss. People say you can't miss what you haven't had, but no group of people reveal this as being more misguided than people who long to know their paternity. "If it hasn't been worked through – possibly because there is still the hope of one day

finding the father – this un mourned loss can occupy a huge inner space of a person's psyche," says Trench.

In many situations, people have not lacked a father figure in their lives, albeit not a genetic dad. Indeed, few people wanting to know more about their biological fathers say they are seeking a paternal relationship. They simply want some questions answered.

Like many people, Stella's anger and hurt stems not only from the "sealed" information but also the lies that surrounded it. "After 50 years, you're pretty OK with who you are. You've long since done the teenage bit of desperately trying to find your identity, but when that's pulled away from you very suddenly, you feel powerless and vulnerable. It's also led to a lot of problems with relationships because of issues around trust. It makes you think, who else might be lying?"

Dr Sharon Pettle, consultant clinical psychologist at Great Ormond Street hospital, has researched the effects of secrets about biological parentage. "When a family secret like this comes out – often from a source that nobody has anticipated – the feelings of shock, distrust and betrayal cannot be over-estimated, no matter how carefully and

sensitively the content is portrayed. One woman summed it up by saying that it was as if the entire scaffolding of her life had fallen down."

Children work hard to grasp a sense of identity from an early age. When they ask how they got into Mummy's tummy and how they got out again, it is part of the search for knowledge about themselves. Dr Pettle adds that there is a very strong emphasis in our culture about similarities in looks, mannerisms and behaviours between parents and their offspring, which serves to confirm the child's place within their kinship group and in the world. "Having that place swept aside can be a hugely powerful experience and I've known some adults to be severely affected psychologically, and experience a period where their emotional stability

'I was told he was a pilot. It was only after Mum died I was told the truth'

Shaun Heard ... 'He didn't even know I was ever born'

was severely compromised. They are left with a gaping hole."

Julie Holguin-Rodriguez, a 42-year-old adoptee, has been more fortunate. Having discovered that her birth mother had died, it became all the more pertinent for her to find her birth father. "In the years between finding out about my birth mother and finding him, people suggested I should just get on with my life and leave the past in the past, but I became more and more curious," she says. "When my son had his first birthday, I realised just how strong my yearning was to know more about my family background – for him as much as me."

Eight years after her reunion with her birth father, the significance of the relationship and the feeling of "completeness" still surprises her. "I'd tried to keep level-headed and accept the search might not be successful and that he might not want to meet me, and I certainly never dared consider a relationship. But we had an instant bond. We are very alike in looks and character. It feels really good to know him and my history. By the

When toys take over

Liz Hollis's mother still fondly remembers the three toys she had as a child in the 50s. Liz herself also recalls most of her own from the 70s. But her children have so many that now even their toys have toys. Should we be concerned at such an excess?

My mother, 67, remembers every toy she owned in her post-war childhood. She had just one bear (so cherished that she has him still, albeit moth-eaten), one doll and a wheelbarrow.

Growing up in the early 70s, I had more: a couple of Mary Quant dolls, six or seven soft toys (some hand-knitted in lurid colours), and an assortment of puzzles and games.

However, both collections are dwarfed in quantity and scope by the toys my daughters, aged just two and eight, already possess. They have lots of toys. Lots and lots and lots of toys. Toys that light up. Toys that talk. Happy Meal toys. Magazine covermount toys. Party-bag toys. Toys that beep, flash, spin, come apart into a hundred tiny pieces. Even some of their toys have toys (no, really).

A head count reveals an alarming 32 Barbies and 28 baby dolls jostling for attention alongside 51 cuddly toys and mountains of multicoloured plastic bits. On every surface and in every corner there is discarded kids' stuff.

Most children have a similar stockpile – the UK's toy industry

is now worth a staggering £2.1bn a year, according to the Toy Retailers Association.

My mother's generation is dismayed: how can receiving yet another party bag brim-full of throwaway plastic equal the intensity of receiving just a couple of presents a year?

Margaret Greentree, who grew up in Norfolk in the 50s, remembers as a child waiting for a whole year before finally receiving her second-hand bike: "It had flat tyres and needed repairing, but it was precious. The ecstasy I felt on receiving it was unsurpassed." Recently, she watched her grandson receive a bike for no particular reason, and she felt sorry for him: "How can he feel the pleasure I felt?"

Dan Fletcher, 86, agrees. His prize possession was a set of wooden farm animals covered in real fur. "They seemed utterly magical. I hardly dared play with them, they were so precious, so I spent a lot of time just looking at them. I kept them in such good condition that I was able to pass them down to my own three sons."

This isn't just nostalgia: in 50s Britain, toys were scarce. During the war, factories swapped production to munitions and imports stopped from Germany, the major toy-making country. Playthings became hallowed objects: enjoyed for a whole childhood;

repaired time and again, and passed on to younger children. A toy today is just another temporary distraction.

Catherine Howell, head of collections and exhibitions at the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green, east London, says that the typical British child's toy collection has increased dramatically decade on decade, especially in the past 20 years. "It must surely have reached saturation point now. It's unimaginable that it could continue to soar at the same rate," she says.

The museum is about to review its contemporary collecting policy because of the huge quantity of toys now on sale. "It's hard to know what will become iconic," says Howell.

Betty Shaw, 62, has run a dolls' hospital for decades. But now, she says, the hospital's only "patients" are family heirlooms with missing eyes and limbs. "I can't imagine a child bringing their Bratz doll to my hospital. They are

On every surface and in every corner there is discarded kids' stuff

so easily come by that kids just wreck them and buy a new one," she says.

Betty still has Molly, her childhood doll, which was cheaply made after the war from "composite" – pulped rags and sawdust mixed with glue. "I had to look after her as I knew I wouldn't get another," she says.

But times change. Now, toys are abundant – and cheap. Should parents really be concerned if their kids seem to have an excess of toys? It's bad news for the toy industry but my mother's generation has a point. Many child psychologists and other experts are also concerned about what's in your child's toy cupboard – at best, they say, you're wasting your money; at worst, you risk stunting your child's development.

Claire Lerner, a child-development worker, carried out a US government-funded study into the effect of inundating children with toys. She found that too many playthings can restrict development and may harm children.

"They get overwhelmed and overstimulated and cannot concentrate on any one thing long enough to learn from it so they just shut down. Too many toys means they are not learning to play imaginatively either," she says.

A study by the University of Stirling recently concluded that expensive, hi-tech toys are a waste of money – children learn just as much from playing with an old mobile phone.

So should parents chuck the lot? Perhaps. In Germany, two public health workers, Rainer Strick and Elke Schubert, persuaded a Munich nursery to pack away all playthings for three months out of every year, leaving the children with nothing but tables, chairs, blankets and their initiative. Then they watched what happened.

Initially, the children were bored but by day two they had turned tables and blankets into dens and were absorbed in make-believe games. They became more imaginative and contented, and in the process learned to concentrate, communicate better and integrate more in groups.

Steiner Waldorf educationalists have long recognised the positive effects of taking away excess toys from children and replacing them with simpler, more natural playthings such as conkers, shells and lengths of fabric to stimulate creative play.

Veronica Moen, director of Myriad Natural Toys, which sells Steiner-influenced playthings, thinks we should radically edit the toy cupboard: "Simpler toys mean imagination has to do all the work. Minimal facial expressions on dolls, for example, make children bestow them with emotions and act out scenarios. Natural materials, like wood, stimulate their senses."

According to Dr John Richer, consultant clinical paediatric psychologist at John Radcliffe hospital, Oxford, "The mistake that many parents make when they buy a toy, especially for very young children, is they get toys that can do a lot, instead of getting toys a child can do a lot with." He says studies show that when a child is confronted with a new object they go through two stages: exploration then play.

In exploration, children ask: "What does this object do?" In play it is "What can I do with this?" When a child is confronted with too many new toys they spend too long exploring and not enough time playing. "The theory is that children who play

more tend to become more creative, imaginative and emotionally secure.

"The impression is they are better at taking initiative and are more adaptable, which is what one wants in a fast-changing world," says Dr Richer.

Less, it seems, is more when it comes to boosting a child's development. Bernadette Duffy, head of Thomas Coram Early Childhood Centre, in London, advises that parents avoid electronic toys and buy ones that need imaginative input from the child: Lego, bricks, farm animals, simple dolls, good books.

And playing simple games with Mum or Dad is worth more than the best-stocked toy cupboard. "Spending time with your child is the best present you can give them," says Duffy.

But what to do with all the tat that your children have already accumulated? Boxing up old toys and bringing them out several months later helps reduce over-stimulation and boredom. Or divide the kids' toys into five bags. Give them a bag for a day or so, then store it away again.

So, box up all the gizmos. Pack away the surfeit of cuddly toys and dolls. Bin the broken bits of plastic and leave out just a few of the classic favourites, such as trains, books, cars, Lego and simple dolls that make children do all the creative work. Stand well back and watch them flourish.

The essential toy cupboard

Under 1 year old

Mirrors; mobiles; rattles; soft books; soft toys

1-3 years

Ball; threading toys; stacking cups; push-pull toys; sand and water toys; crayons and paper; plastic jug and beakers for pouring water

3-5 years

Dressing-up clothes; felt-tipped pens, colouring books and paper; an indoor tent; jigsaw puzzles; construction toys; a plastic tea set

5-7 years

Skiping rope; playing cards; little people toys; a post office set

7-10 years

Junior Scrabble; snakes and ladders; collections of things; a money box

The truth is, of course, that no toys are essential – either for a child's development or for them to have fun. But some toys are much better than others. The golden rule is: don't think about what a toy can DO; what really matters is what a child CAN DO WITH IT.



From top: Margaret Greentree with her bear; Liz Hollis with her toys; and Kate and Charlotte with theirs. Photos by Si Barber

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To be perfectly honest, the only prejudice and hostility I have faced for being lesbian came from my mother's Family forum, page 6