



WHAT MAKES A BABY  
READER'S  
GUIDE



# Acknowledgments

Thanks go to the many parents and educators who read all or part of this guide and offered feedback and input. All remaining mistakes are mine, but much of what is good in here is thanks to them.

Special thanks go to Fiona Smyth, Alison Kooistra, Daniel Greenwald, and Veronica Liu who generously donated their time and immense talents so that this guide could be made available for free.

And final thanks to the hundreds of readers who have sent emails sharing their experiences reading *What Makes a Baby* with their families, asking questions, and challenging me to find ways to be ever more inclusive in my efforts.

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# Note to the Reader

*What Makes a Baby* was written to be read to a child by a grown-up. The book does more than offer the basic facts of reproduction; it invites the adult reader to share with a child the unique story of how that particular child came to be in the world, in their community, and in their family. While it's a story with a happy ending (because it resulted in the child the book is being read to), that doesn't mean it didn't have a few bumps along the way.

You may be worried about how to share this story in a way that is age-appropriate. Even with very young children it is possible—and many professionals agree that it is best—to begin to share basic information in a way that lets children know that their curiosity is normal and that it is okay to ask questions. *What Makes a Baby* can help you do this.

This reader's guide offers the adult reader support by sharing tips, answers to commonly asked questions, and extra information that you may want to use while reading *What Makes a Baby* with a child.

There isn't one story of conception, gestation, and birth. Most books choose to focus on specific physiological and anatomical details of how babies are made. *What Makes a Baby* focuses on a different part of the story.

It focuses on the child's experience and leaves many blank spaces to allow the adult reader to share stories, and to allow the children to ask questions. This book doesn't pretend to give you all the answers. I know that can feel frustrating or worrying at first, but I think you might be amazed (and amused) by the results of reading this with your child.

There isn't one way to educate or raise a child, and there certainly isn't one way to talk about reproduction, bodies, and sexual health. *What Makes a Baby* is designed to give you, the adult reader, as much space as possible to educate and communicate in a way that fits for you, your child, your family, and your community.

I hope you enjoy the book and also find it helpful. If you have any comments or questions, please let me know—I'd love to hear from you. I won't have answers for every question, but I will be happy to direct you to resources or other professionals or parents who may be able to help. You may contact me by email ([cory@corysilverberg.com](mailto:cory@corysilverberg.com)) or via the contact form on the website ([www.what-makes-a-baby.com/contact-us](http://www.what-makes-a-baby.com/contact-us)).

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# How to Use this Guide

Before reading further, be sure to read through *What Makes a Baby* first. You might find it helpful to have the book in front of you while you're reading this guide.

This guide is divided into three sections:

**Chapter One** has **general tips** on talking with young children about sexuality and reproduction. It also provides some of the **common questions** children ask while reading the book, and examples of how you might choose to respond.

**Chapter Two** is a **page-by-page breakdown** of *What Makes a Baby*. For each page you will find different kinds of information:

**WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY:** Everything in this book was written in a very particular way, with a few particular goals in mind. I wanted to create a book that would be flexible enough in its story and illustrations so that children from all different kinds of families could see themselves and their stories reflected on the page. And I also wanted to give adults a tool that would help them challenge all the assumptions about what is “normal” when it comes to families, bodies, and making babies. Understanding why I use certain words or images rather than others may help you get more out of reading the book with a child.

**TALKING POINTS:** Some kids will dive right in and want to talk about what they see in the book; others will need some support to start asking questions. *Talking Points* suggests questions you may want to ask and fun things you may want to point out to the child reader while you're reading.

**MORE INFORMATION:** At times, you may want to start a more involved conversation with your child about gender, race, bodies, and family structure, or about the process of fetal growth and development. *More Infor-*

mation flags some of these moments and offers additional points to raise or resources that you can draw on to help you explain the ideas.

**VALUES AND BELIEFS:** Talking about sexuality, reproduction, and the process of building a family includes talking about values and beliefs. Under this heading, I highlight opportunities to share your own values and beliefs as you read with a child.

**Chapter Three** offers a kind of advanced **guide to specific topics** including how you can use this book to talk about different methods of reproduction and issues of race, gender, bodies, disability, and difference.

**Chapter Four** lists suggested **resources**. *What Makes a Baby* is just one of many books that you'll likely want to use as you have conversations over the years with your child or children about reproduction and sexuality, and in this section you'll discover other books and online tools that might help you in these ongoing conversations.

*What Makes a Baby* isn't exactly like the sex education material you may have encountered before. It's meant to be fun, and it's meant to be read many times. If the book is successful, both you and the child you're reading with will want to pick it up and read it together again and again.

Talking about how babies are born and become part of a family can never be covered in one conversation. The benefit of *What Makes a Baby* is that it offers grown-ups and children words to use and the space to use them. It will give you many chances to talk about these things, which hopefully will alleviate some stress about getting it "right" the first time.

It's also worth acknowledging that sexuality and reproduction are usually thought of as experiences that are separate from the rest of life. But really, they aren't. They are as connected to the rest of our lives as anything else. By making this book as fun and accessible as any other, you are reinforcing the message that sexuality and reproduction are topics that matter and that it is okay to ask, think, and talk about them.

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# Communication Strategies

## 1.1 TIPS ON TALKING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN ABOUT REPRODUCTION AND SEXUALITY

There are many reasons to talk with even very young children about where they came from and about where all babies come from. Every child has their own level of curiosity; some will have questions early and often and others may seem uninterested. The crucial thing is to ensure that a child knows if they have a question, they can ask it and receive a thoughtful and informative answer.

All too often adults shut children down because they feel uncertain about how to answer a question or if it is even appropriate for them to answer it at all. But every question can be answered in an age-appropriate way, though it's not always easy to know how. Sometimes the answer will be one word, sometimes it will be long and detailed. The only wrong answer, in my opinion, is one that shuts down the question, including giving no answer at all.

Some Short Answers to Long Questions:

I'll tell you later.\*

That's a great question. Let me think about it for a bit.

I need to think about that. Let's talk about it later.\*

You know what, I'm not sure about that. I'm going to do some research to figure it out and I'll let you know what I discover.

That's pretty difficult to explain, and now isn't a good time for me to try. But let's talk about it at home.\*

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\*If you say you'll answer it later, you have to follow through. Avoidance is okay as long as it's temporary, and you should avoid making promises you don't keep.

One of the themes of *What Makes a Baby* is that we all grow and we all learn differently. The paths that we travel may be similar, but the way we travel them, how long or what route we take, and whether we want to travel alone or with others are where individuality and personality express themselves.

Good sex education is responsive to each individual and their chosen path. As an adult with a child in your life, you are in a good position to assess what kind of learner the child is, and how much or how little extra information to offer the child.

I would say that the first rule of talking with kids about where they came from is to be a good listener. Here are a few other tips:

#### FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

Every child has their own rhythm and pace of learning. As adults, when we read with children we can often unwittingly push children to conform to how we think things should go. We might rush them through a page that doesn't seem important to us, or go very slowly during a passage we think matters the most. And we tend to rank some information as more or less important than other information.

Whenever possible, and especially the first few times you read *What Makes a Baby*, pay attention to when the child you are reading with seems bored and when they are rapt with attention. As you're reading the book with them, try to notice when they want to linger and when they seem in a hurry to keep going. Don't insist that they stay on a page they aren't interested in, even if you think it's crucial information. You'll have other opportunities to share that information and there is a lot you can learn about how best to communicate with them if you can follow their lead.

#### TAKE THE TIME YOU NEED TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

Most questions kids ask will have more than one possible answer. It's perfectly acceptable to say something like

That's a great question, let me think about it a bit and answer it later.

You can use this as a delay tactic but not to avoid a question altogether. If you promise to answer later, you need to follow through. But you don't need to feel pressured to answer on the spot. When you give yourself time to think a question and answer through, and talk it out with a friend, partner, or family member, your answer will usually be better for it.

#### DON'T FEEL LIKE YOU HAVE TO SHARE EVERY DETAIL

Each question a child asks deserves a response. And questions about the world in general can always be answered in an age-appropriate way. It's also entirely appropriate for you to make your own judgments around how much specific or personal information you want to share and when.

For example, a question about adoption can be answered by explaining adoption in general. You could take it a step further. If you adopted your child, you could remind them of that, or you could mention someone else they know who was adopted by their parents. But sharing all the specific details of the circumstances of their adoption, particularly if they are complicated or painful, might not make sense for, say, a five- or six-year-old. If a child needs more information and you've opened the door to questions, they will ask. Starting with general responses is usually a safe bet.

Another example: If part of your reproduction story includes intercourse, you don't need to explain penile-vaginal intercourse in detail to your five-year-old. They don't need to know the details and they probably won't care. But you can explain that you and your partner were the ones who brought the sperm and egg together that created the child.

Similarly, if you are transgender, you probably aren't going to get into a detailed conversation with your five-year-old about your gender transition. But this might be the opportunity to talk about the diversity of gender and bodies. In fact, the book opens up opportunities for parents of all genders to talk to their children about gender.

You'll find good examples of how to handle these types of questions in section 1.2, Common Questions (below). If you're not sure about what terms like transgender or cisgender mean, you'll find a glossary at the end of this guide.

#### REMEMBER THAT SEX EDUCATION IS LIFE EDUCATION

When we talk about sexuality and reproduction, we are not just talking about bodies and science. We are talking about values and beliefs, culture, religion, ethnicity, history, and life in general. As you're reading *What Makes a Baby*, look for opportunities to share your own values and beliefs about the world, which will be connected to your values and beliefs around sexuality and reproduction. The book was written in a way to allow adults a lot of room to do this and to do it in the way that works the best for them.

#### BE DIRECT

Very young children don't yet know that talking about reproduction or sexuality can be difficult for grown-ups. How you talk with kids about their birth teaches them just as much (if not more) than what you tell them.

Being direct isn't the same thing as being explicit or even detailed (remember: general information can be just what's needed). Being direct communicates honesty and a willingness to discuss complex or difficult issues. It creates an environment where a child feels safe to ask questions and feels confident that they will receive accurate and helpful answers.

#### USE CONCRETE EXAMPLES AND RELATE THE ANSWER TO YOUR CHILD'S OWN EXPERIENCES

Most young children need things to be explained simply and clearly, especially the first time they learn something. Actually, that's something that is true for most of us!

Remember that sexuality is about more than sex, and you can help a child understand that by using examples from other parts of life to explain topics related to reproduction. For example, if you want to explain the idea of a sperm donor, you might point out that there are people in your life who give you gifts. Some gifts are small (like when someone gives a child a balloon) some gifts are big (like spending a day at a carnival or going away on vacation). You might use these examples to introduce the idea of a gift and then say that someone gave you a gift of donating sperm so that you could make a baby. For more concrete examples, check out section 1.2.

## 1.2 COMMON QUESTIONS KIDS ASK WHEN READING *WHAT MAKES A BABY*

### WHO HAS WHAT?

Reading this book may be the first time kids learn that bodies have parts called eggs, sperm, or uterus. You may not get questions about this on the first few readings, but eventually, and with older or more curious children, you may get questions along the lines of:

Does my body have eggs? Do I have a uterus? Do I have sperm?

Does your body have them?

Does my brother/sister (etc.) have them?

### SOMETIMES A SHORT ANSWER WILL DO.

To grown-ups, these may seem like loaded questions, but they are actually quite concrete. The child isn't necessarily asking for a lesson about sex or gender or the details of human reproduction. Here's an exchange sent to me by a reader who, with her partner, read the book with their four-year-old:

Child: Mama, do I have sperm?  
Mama: No sweetie, you have a uterus and eggs.  
Child: Do you have sperm?  
Mama: No, I have a uterus and eggs.  
Child: Does Papa have sperm?  
Papa: No sweetie, I don't have sperm. Some papas do, but I don't.

That was all the child wanted and she was happy to move on. The parents know that at some point there will be questions about where the sperm came from, but they'll wait until their daughter asks. Here are a few examples of other short answers to this kind of question:

Yes, your body does have eggs and a uterus.

Your body will have sperm, but your body has to make the sperm and it won't start until you're a bit older.

No, my body doesn't have a uterus in it. Like the book says, some bodies do and some don't.

#### SOMETIMES THEY DO WANT TO KNOW MORE.

Children may want to know more and may ask detailed questions, or ask the same question over and over. Questions about who has what are often questions about the differences between people.

Humans aren't born with an understanding of what differences mean. The meaning assigned to even the most basic of biological/bodily differences is something we learn from the social and cultural world we live in. By the time they are four or five, most children will have been exposed to myths and stereotypes about sex and gender. They will have been told that boys have this and girls have that.

The truth is that most boys' bodies have a penis and scrotum, and will eventually have sperm, and most girls' bodies have eggs and a uterus—but it isn't true for all of us. The truth is much more interesting than that.

Being a boy or a girl, a man or a woman, definitely has to do with bodily difference. There are all kinds of ways people express and recognize boy-ness, girl-ness, manhood, and womanhood on and through their bodies. But no one needs a penis or vagina, a scrotum or sperm, or eggs or a uterus to do this.

If your children are asking these questions, it's probably because they are noticing that boys and girls, men and women, are treated differently in the world. They may also be noticing that bodies they see are different.

It's good that they are noticing this. But your job can be in part to explain that the differences they see are only part of the bigger picture.

Having two gender categories—one for boys and men, one for women and girls—gives a general sense of the pattern of human genders, but is so general that it ignores all of that pattern's beautiful intricacy. When we reflect on our own experiences and the experiences of people we know, it probably makes more sense to think of gender as a spectrum. And our own precise spot in that spectrum may move around throughout our lives.

Some of us find ourselves somewhere in the middle. We may be sure we're a girl and we may express ourselves that way even though we're born with "boy" body parts. We might feel that some parts of us are boyish, some parts girlish, and some parts a combination of the two. And of course we may have a body that looks the way we feel without having a uterus or eggs or sperm.

Discussion of all of this might be a long way off in the future for a young child, but as an educator I'm aware of how powerful (and subtle) early messages are, and how they can easily lead to our thinking as adults that there is something wrong with us if we don't fit neatly into the expected categories of sex and gender, or that we have failed as parents if we don't have sperm or eggs to contribute to the baby-making process.

The upside is that it's possible to help even the very young understand that the world is varied, amazing, and complex, and still provide information that they can understand. Here are a few examples of longer answers to the question about who has what:

Yes my body does have eggs. Only they weren't cooperating much so we got the egg that helped us make you from somewhere else.

My body does have sperm, but not all boys' or men's bodies do. Just like the book says, some bodies do and some bodies don't. It's something that isn't really that important until you get older if you decide you want to be a parent too.

Children may confuse body parts and gender, and they might ask something like:

Do all girls have eggs and a uterus? Do all boys have sperm?

To which you could simply answer:

Not all girls have eggs, but most do. Not all boys have sperm, but most do.

Or you might want to give a longer response:

I'm a woman, but my body doesn't have a uterus anymore. Most girls and women have eggs and a uterus, but not everyone does. It's one of the cool things about people, we're all a little bit the same, and we're all a little bit different.

Or a trans parent might choose to share something like this:

I'm your papa, but I was born with a body that had eggs, and when we wanted to make you we used my egg.

Or:

I'm your mama, but I was born with a body that had sperm. A long time ago, way before I became your mama, doctors helped me take the sperm from my body and keep it safe in a special kind of container, so that when I wanted to make a baby, I could use my sperm. So your sperm came from me.

So it isn't always the case that boys have sperm and girls have eggs. Sometimes papas can be the one to give the egg and sometimes mamas give the sperm.

#### PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE QUESTIONS

Understanding the difference between public and private is an important lesson that all children need to learn, and not just in the context of sexual health. It's something that helps them navigate social worlds with greater safety and comfort. You may already have experience talking about public and private with your child in the context of where it's okay for them to undress, where it's okay for them to talk loudly (or scream), and other kinds of activities.

To most young children, body parts like eggs and sperm are no different than an elbow or belly button. As adults we experience eggs, sperm, and uteri as something very different, special, and related to gender and sexuality.

As a result we usually don't talk about them in public the way we might talk about our knees or feet. Young children won't understand that yet, and you may need to explain this to them.

As a parent you will want to explain your values and beliefs about what is private and what is public. But it's equally important to explain to your child what the social and/or cultural expectations are of the communities they are in when it comes to private and public conversations about body parts and making babies.

When a child asks you about who has sperm, eggs, or a uterus, it's an opportunity to answer the question *and* help them understand that this topic is one that is private for most people.

Here's an example of a longer answer that also gives a child information about public vs. private conversations:

Yes, my body does have eggs. In fact, you were made partly from my egg. For grown-ups this is one of those things that is kind of private. So it's okay to ask me about this, and we can always talk about it at home, but it isn't the kind of thing we usually talk about with other people unless we know them very well.

That's a great question, and I'm glad you asked me. I'm your dad, and you can always ask me any question. But I want you to know this is a question that is private, so I wouldn't want you asking just anyone if they have eggs or sperm. Let's think about who are the people in your life you can ask private questions.

With this second response, you would then talk with the child about other people you consider to be safe and private (that might be a sibling, a godparent, a spouse, etc.). Sex educator, parent/advocate, and author Terri Couwenhoven describes sexuality as "private but discussable" when she is teaching parents and young people, and I think this is a great way of explaining that while sexuality may be private, it is something you can talk about and ask questions about. You just need to choose the right or most appropriate people to talk to.

#### CAN ONLY GROWN-UPS MAKE A BABY? CAN I MAKE A BABY?

The text on pages 14–15 refers to "grown-ups" making babies, and this sometimes sparks a question about what it means to be a grown-up, and when people are old enough to make babies. Most children won't want (or need) a lesson about sexual development at this age (although for those that do, there are great other books you can find in the resource section that can help with those questions).

For very young children, it will often be enough to say something like this:

It says grown-ups because very young people's bodies can't make babies yet. You have to be older and your body has to grow more before you can even try. It doesn't always work, but it's something we can talk about more if you want to know more.



Or, if you prefer to offer something more concrete and more specifically related to sexual development, you could say something like this:

Our bodies all change as we get older. How they change can be different but some of the things that can happen are that we get bigger, or we grow more hair on our bodies. Sometimes the way we move and the way we communicate changes too. Once your body has had some of these changes then you might be able to make a baby. It's still a long way off though, and we'll talk lots more about it as you get older.

Even though it will be many years before this is a personal issue for the child you are reading to, when answering these questions, try and remember that not every grown-up wants to have babies *and* not every grown-up who wants babies is able to make them.

You can open up those possibilities by pointing out people in your child's life who don't have children and who are happy grown-ups. This shouldn't be about pushing a child in one direction or another, but instead about letting them know there are many options for being a happy and healthy grown-up.

#### HOW DOES THE BABY GET INTO THE UTERUS?

Pages 16–17 introduce the uterus as “a place where a baby can grow.” This might prompt kids to ask how a baby gets in the uterus. A short answer might be something like:

There are lots of ways that sperm and egg get together and that a baby gets into the uterus. Sometimes the people making the baby do it on their own and sometimes they get help.

Obviously this isn't a complete answer, but remember that this isn't the kind of question you need to answer all at once, and that these are conversations you'll have many times over the years. If the child isn't satisfied with your answer, they will let you know!

For more detailed responses, see section 3.1 on describing the different methods of reproduction and fertilization.

#### HOW COME THE BABY DOESN'T GROW?

There are many reasons why an embryo won't become a baby and they are all difficult to talk about. Many children won't notice the sentence on page 23 that says that not every embryo grows into a fetus and becomes a baby. But some children will. There are lots of ways to answer this question, and

your answer should be guided by your child and by your own sense of how much to share and how much your child can understand. You don't need to use technical language (for example, miscarriage) but you can share with a child, in a way that makes sense to them, the fact that the business of making babies isn't always easy or clear-cut.

Here are two sample responses that offer a little information, then leave it open for the child to ask more if they want:

Sometimes the egg and the sperm came together but they couldn't match up just right. Sometimes it's because they couldn't share their stories, or the stories didn't fit together. But something just doesn't work, and nothing grows. This is usually pretty sad for the people trying to make a baby. Sometimes they try again, sometimes they try a different way.

We don't always know why it doesn't grow. It's sort of the same as when we try to grow a plant. We put the seed in the ground and water it and care for it, but sometimes it just doesn't grow. Maybe it had to do with the seed or the soil, or the water we used, or maybe a big storm came and washed it away. And maybe it's a mystery we just can't figure out. Because people trying to make a baby usually really want one, it means that when the tiny thing does not grow it can be sad.

Remember that young children don't have an adults' understanding of all the thoughts and feelings that go along with getting pregnant and then not giving birth. This book can be an opportunity simply to let them know that the process isn't always simple, which is something they'll learn more about as they get older.

# Page-by-Page Guide

It's important for even very young children to learn about boundaries and privacy, and the way you read this book can model those kinds of boundaries for the child or children you want to read it with.

Allow yourself to read through the story once before you read it to a child. Check your own responses to the language and the illustrations.

Give some thought in particular to how you will answer the questions that are posed to the child on pages 24, 25, and 36:

Who helped bring together the sperm and the egg that made you?

Who was happy that it was YOU who grew?

Who was waiting for you to be born?

The first time you read *What Makes a Baby* with a child, don't feel the need to add a lot of extra information. Consider it like a first pass. Chances are that the child will be happy to look at the pictures and take in the information. If they have questions, they'll ask, but since this may be the first time they are getting this information a lot of children will just absorb, and may ask questions later.

Think of the first read as your way of starting a conversation that will take place over many readings and many years.

Use this page-by-page readers guide if you want some ideas on how to use the book to start conversations about reproduction in general and your child's birth story in particular. If you're looking for help responding to questions kids might ask at various places in the book, check out section 1.2 where common questions are answered.

**Pages 4–5:**        **“This is a story about how babies are made. The first thing you need to know is that you can’t make a baby out of nothing. You have to start with something.”**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

I didn’t want this book to be a lesson or feel like a lecture. It’s supposed to be a fun book to read and by being fun, it should make talking about sexuality and reproduction a little bit easier. Because for most of us, a fun book means a story of some sort, I wanted to start with a story, but just one of many that you will share with the child reader.

I made the point that the story isn’t about just them, it’s about all babies, because the book is intended to be as inclusive as possible.

#### TALKING POINTS

Starting with babies gives you a chance to gauge the child’s sense of themselves as a baby. You might ask them:

Are you still a baby? Why, or why not?

Do you remember being a baby?

What makes a baby a baby?

Do you know any babies?

Is \_\_\_\_ a baby?

Fill in the blank with the name of a baby they know—perhaps a cousin, the child of one of your friends, or a baby they know from daycare or school. And finally, you can point out that the story they are about to hear is about *all* those babies. Including them and including you, since everyone was a baby once, including grown-ups.

#### VALUES AND BELIEFS

This idea that you can’t make something from nothing will be too abstract for some children, but others may be curious, and it can give you an opportunity to give other examples that are tied to your own beliefs:

Example 1: You might choose to talk about something scientific (like how plants don’t just grow, they need sunlight, and food, and a place to grow). Or you might talk about energy and how the energy to drive a bus (or a car or a tractor) or fly a plane was made from gasoline that had to be dug up from deep in the earth.

Example 2: You might want to share something of your spiritual or religious beliefs here. The book says that you need “something” to make a baby. Later on it explains the literal meaning of this (e.g. egg, sperm). But you might choose to say more about what you believe that “something” is. For some it might be love, or fate, or a higher power.

**Pages 6–7: “This is an egg. Not all bodies have eggs in them. Some do, and some do not.”**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

I want this book to be as useful for grown-ups who choose to explain reproduction from a scientific perspective as it is for grown-ups who want to focus on the spiritual or other aspects of reproduction. This meant keeping the words to a minimum, and letting the child and the grown-up fill in the rest.

I also didn’t want to make it a *big* deal, because even if it is a big deal in some ways, in other ways, this is just part of life. Very young children don’t think of eggs and sperm as “sexual” or strange because they haven’t learned about them yet.

A second goal was to tell a story that was true for as many people as possible. You might expect the book to explain that eggs are something women have, or that all women have eggs. But that’s not true. Not all women have eggs. Some women are born with female reproductive anatomy but are not able to produce eggs. Trans women are born with male reproductive anatomy and their bodies never had eggs. So it is more accurate to say that some bodies have eggs and some don’t.

You’ll notice that this book doesn’t describe intercourse and doesn’t explain gender. Those are both topics that will be covered in the next book in this series.

#### TALKING POINTS

One way to engage kids on this page is to ask them if they notice which bodies on the page have eggs and which do not.

Notice that some of the bodies on page 7 have eggs, some have sperm, and one body has neither. As adults we don’t all have viable sperm or eggs. Some of us have one, some have the other, and some have neither. Of course our bodies don’t need sperm or eggs for us to be parents, and this can be one of the messages of the book. Many children won’t be interested in this, but for those that are, it’s okay to let them know that

not everyone has eggs and that it's usually something you find out when you're grown-up.

#### MORE INFORMATION

The bodies are illustrated to be human but without a clear gender. Young children probably won't pick up on this. But these bodies present an opportunity to start a conversation about gender, and how some bodies might "look" like men or masculine and others might "look" like women or feminine. For more, see section 3.3.

What many children will notice is the colors. Children tend to love the bright colors of the bodies. Some will ask about why the bodies don't have colors like regular people's skin tones. This opens an opportunity to talk a bit about race (see section 3.2) if you choose.

**Pages 8–9:            "Inside the egg are so many stories all about the body  
                                 the egg came from."**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

Most young children will have a hard time understanding the concept of DNA or the idea that information is stored in cells. And young children don't really need to know about DNA. But it is important for them to understand that they, and all babies, are a product of both genetics and their environment and upbringing. The language of stories opens up a discussion about both. There are stories that were told before the child was born (information in their DNA) and stories that were told after a child was born, which might be thought of as the values and background of their family and community.

#### TALKING POINTS

Explore the different illustrations with the child you are reading with. You might want to ask them what stories they think are being told in the different pictures. Note that in the bottom middle part of the egg there is a strand of DNA. For children who are curious you might want to point that out and explain that while there aren't really puppet shows in your body, DNA is something that's in your body, and it's where the stories are kept.

**Pages 10–11:**     **“This is a sperm. Not all bodies have sperm in them. Some do, and some do not.”**

These pages echo the information on pages 6–7, except here we introduce sperm. See notes for those pages.

**Pages 12–13:**     **“Inside the sperm, just like inside the egg, there are so many stories about the body the sperm came from.”**

These pages echo the information on pages 8–9, except here we see a detail of sperm. See notes for those pages.

**Pages 14–15:**     **“When grown-ups want to make a baby they need to get an egg from one body and sperm from another body. They also need a place where the baby can grow.”**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

On these pages you may notice that there is no reference to gender. It doesn’t say you need sperm from a man and egg from a woman. This is intentional and is written to be most accurate.

Even though it’s true that most men have sperm and most women have eggs, it is not true that all men have sperm and all women have eggs. The biological sex of a human body is not always so clear-cut. And even when it is, being a man or a woman is mostly about gender, and gender isn’t determined by biological sex. There are men whose bodies have ovaries and eggs (some trans men), and there are women whose bodies have (or had) sperm (some trans women).

Thus the wording tells a story that is true for all people, and not one that is only true for some. Even a gendered story that would include most people would exclude many people, and would also give kids inaccurate information that would have to be “un learned” at some point down the road.

The language of bodies (rather than men and women) also makes it easier to talk about the fact that some of us get sperm and eggs not from people we know, but from banks where the origin of the sperm or the egg

is less important to the birth story than the fact that the parent or parents chose to get the sperm or egg from a donor.

#### VALUES AND BELIEFS

I use the term “grown-ups” intentionally to allow the adult reader the opportunity to share some of the values and beliefs of their community or culture in terms of who is ready to have children.

From a medical perspective, as soon as a body has viable sperm or egg it is capable of contributing to reproduction.

But these pages offer an opportunity to share something of your own traditions, values, or beliefs around when it’s time to take on the responsibility of having children. It’s also a chance to explain that the dominant culture has it’s own messages about what’s right and wrong. But that in reality different communities and cultures will have different practices, and one practice doesn’t need to be the “right” one for everyone.

**Pages 16–17:**     **“This is a uterus. It is a place where a baby can grow. You might think that everyone has a uterus, since it has the words YOU and US in it. But not everyone has a uterus.”**

These pages echo the information on pages 6–7 and 10–11, except here we introduce the uterus. See notes for those pages.

**Pages 18–19:**     **“Just like eggs, and just like sperm, some bodies have a uterus and some bodies do not. Every body that has a uterus always has it in the same place, just below the belly button, in the squishy middle part.”**

These pages echo the information on pages 6–7 and 10–11, except here we introduce the uterus. See notes for those pages.



**Pages 20–21:** **“When an egg and a sperm meet, they swirl together in a special kind of dance. As they dance, they talk to each other. The egg tells the sperm all the stories it has to tell about the body it came from. And the sperm tells the egg all the stories it has to tell about the body it came from.”**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

I wanted to find a way of describing the current understanding of fertilization. It’s not true that sperm do some masculine marching forth and eggs are all feminine and passive. Both are actively involved and there is no need (and no scientific evidence) to suggest that the action of a sperm is a masculine action and the action of an egg is feminine. These are cells in our body and while they contain sex chromosomes, they are not gendered.

So instead of describing fertilization using gendered imagery I describe a dance, and a sharing of information, which is one way of understanding what happens at the moment of fertilization.

#### TALKING POINTS

These pages continue the metaphor of stories used to describe the sperm and the egg. This idea of a new human starting off as a collection of stories, biological, environmental, and cultural ones, can be an opportunity to talk about how you believe we become who we are.

There isn’t one right answer to what influences us most. There are our genes (the stories referenced on this page), as well as our family, our culture and community, our spiritual or religious beliefs and practices, as well as things like race, class, and embodiment.

If you are a parent who isn’t biologically related to your child, this page might feel uncomfortable at first to talk about. And if you don’t have very much information about where the sperm and/or egg came from that helped your child come to be, you might not have much genetic information to offer your child when they ask questions.

If you don’t have, or don’t want to share, specific information about their genetic “stories,” you can offer other examples of relatives, or even pets, who are biologically related and might share a common feature, like brown eyes or being allergic to milk. Or you might be able to share some of the more general “stories” you do know about the geographic area where your adopted child was born or about the family background of the sperm or egg donor, surrogate, or biological parent(s).

Remember that at a young age most children aren’t looking for a lot of details. You can start with a little and let their questions, and your assessment of what is appropriate and when, guide you from there.

**Page 22:**           **“When their dance is done they are not two things any more. They danced around and shared so much that they became one brand new thing.”**

#### TALKING POINTS

You can have fun on this page by pointing out that this “brand new thing” is a combination of elements that we saw earlier in the egg and the sperm. The DNA strand from the egg is there, but it’s in a picture frame we saw in the sperm. The filmstrip from the egg now has the book from the sperm in it. The tree stump from the sperm now has the puppet from the egg dancing on it.

#### MORE INFORMATION

The process being described here is the process of conception the end result of which, which we see illustrated on this page, is a zygote, or a fertilized egg cell. Older children might be interested to see actual images of a fertilized egg, and you can find them in some books listed in the resource section.

**Page 23:**           **“At first it is just a tiny thing. Sometimes this tiny thing does not grow. And sometimes it grows into a baby (like you did.)”**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

I want this book to be an opportunity for us to talk about our bodies and our experience as they are, and not in some idealized way. Not only do idealized stories leave most of us out, they suggest an inaccurate picture of the way the world works.

The truth is that not every fertilized egg becomes a baby. Miscarriages and abortions are two common experiences, both of which result in a fertilized egg NOT becoming a baby.

Even though these experiences are so common, they are almost never mentioned, and one result is that people can feel embarrassed or ashamed when they experience it. This shame only makes a hard situation worse.

The reference here isn’t meant to suggest that parents should (or must) explain to their child the details of, for example, a miscarriage. But I felt it was important to have in the book since it’s a part of trying to make babies, and I believe it’s possible to include it as a part of the story to children in a way that is understandable but not traumatic.

Many young children won't even notice this line. For those who do, or if you are a parent who wants to share more about this point, you'll find suggestions in section 1.2.

#### TALKING POINTS

This is the first time we are showing what is happening inside bodies from an outside perspective. Our helpful arm and hand is holding a magnifying glass to indicate (not to scale!) that the zygote is something so small that it can't be seen without help of technology.

You can let the child you are reading to know that when the egg and the sperm finish their dance the thing they become really is that small. That is, we all started out as something very, very tiny. Many books use the point of a pencil as a rough comparison.

**Page 24:**                   **“Who helped bring together the sperm and the egg that made you?”**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

This page provides a prompting question to let you share some of the story of how the child you are reading the book to came to be made. If you're looking for suggestions on how to tell that story see section 3.1: Talking about Different Methods of Reproduction.

This wording was among the most difficult to come up with. I wanted a question that would let parents or caregivers tell their story however they wanted. And I wanted a question that would leave room for the story to change as families change over time. Most traditional sex education books stick to the current medical understanding of reproduction and insist that the biological parents are the center of the story. I wanted to write this book in a way that allows parents or caregivers to decide what to focus on and that doesn't put any one method of reproduction or kind of family at the center (and the rest on the margins).

As they get older, children will (or at least can) learn the details of reproduction on a cellular level. I wanted the first story they hear to be infused with tradition from the people who are raising them, that is you, the adult reader(s).

You might notice that the question doesn't even ask *where* the sperm and egg came from or *whose* sperm and egg made you. This might be important information for some of you, and you can tell a story that starts with that if you like. But the goal of this book is to allow the adult reader,

whether they call themselves a parent, uncle, auntie, or caregiver, to include themselves and the child reader in the center of the story.

A parent who didn't contribute sperm or egg is no less a parent, and they shouldn't be any less in this story simply because they did not contribute genetic material. At the same time an anonymous sperm donor or a birth parent who allowed their child to be adopted are biologically related to the child but may or may not be important people in your families' story.

I felt this wording allowed for a specific starting point but also the blankest possible canvas so that parents or caregivers can paint a picture that reflects their reality, their community, and their values. The more generic story of biological reproduction can, and should, be told. But it doesn't need to be the first story we tell.

Very young children don't need (and most don't want) the intricate details of how the egg and sperm met. Instead the story you share can focus on your involvement, or when you got involved, and most importantly can leave the door open for the child to ask more questions when they are ready.

#### TALKING POINTS

Visually this page and the next are so rich, and children love spending time exploring the park.

The illustration is created to allow you to start many conversations, here are some questions that can start conversations:

Do you notice all the different kinds of families or groups of people? Let's describe what you see.

Do you notice the different ways that people are getting around and moving through the park?

Do you see people who look like people you know? Do you see people who you look brand new? Why and what's new about them?

#### VALUES AND BELIEFS

The wording of the question on page 24 is left open to make space for all beliefs around what makes a baby, including, for some, help in the form of divine intervention. It might be fate, or luck, or God, or destiny. But if your understanding of how babies are made includes something beyond the science of reproduction, as we know it today, here's an opportunity to share that with the young reader.

**Page 25: “Who was happy that it was *you* who grew?”**

WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

This second question is there both to remind the child that however they came to be, there are a lot of people in the world today who are very happy that they were born.

In truth, birth stories are not always happy ones. I don’t expect readers to share with very young children the harder stories about struggles with infertility, adoption, illness, or the ways that anything other than biological heterosexual reproduction is viewed with a kind of suspicion, as if all these other ways of bringing children into our lives are not “normal” or don’t make “real” families. These difficult stories stay with us, but I wanted an opportunity to focus purely on the joy of family, especially chosen family, at the best and happiest moments.

TALKING POINTS

This question is an opportunity to talk about the importance of family (both chosen and biological) as well as community.

It’s not just biological family who are happy when a child is born (and, of course, not all biological relatives will be happy whenever a new baby comes along). Maybe there was someone at work who was especially supportive during the wait for a child to be born. Or maybe there’s someone in the child’s life right now who is particularly close to them. Each time you read this you can name different people, and you can also ask the child to answer the question; who do they think is happy that it was they who grew?

**Pages 26–27: “Everything that grows, grows differently. Each of us grows in our own way. How a baby grows depends on the stories that the egg and sperm share and on the uterus the baby is growing inside of.”**

WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

Even before a baby is born there is so much focus on their development, and this focus often causes anxiety about whether or not they are developing “normally.” This pressure is not helpful for parents and certainly isn’t helpful for children once they become aware of it.

Whatever you think of the idea of developmental stages the truth is that we DO all grow differently. No two of us are exactly the same (even if we're identical twins!). And the way we grow is a part of who we are. This means that even if the way a child grows differs from what parents, community, or medicine say should happen, there is strength and beauty in the story of their growing.

#### TALKING POINTS

This page and the next provide an opportunity to explain diversity not only in the ways people grow, but in all living things. Each child grows in their own way, just like each fish does, each blade of grass, each sunflower, or each butterfly.

You can point out the different examples of things growing in these pictures. Children at different ages, different sizes of fish and sunflowers. Adults at different ages and stages. Even the water fountain has some things that are big and small.

#### MORE INFORMATION

For some children the text on this page may not be of much interest. For children that want to know details about how a baby grows these pages provide an opportunity to introduce the idea that we grow as a result of nature and nurture.

How a baby grows depends in part on the genetic material it receives from egg and the sperm, or what we've been calling "stories." Whether or not a baby will grow to be tall or short, have blue eyes or brown, etc., will have something to do with the stories that the egg and sperm shared.

But how a baby grows also depends on other things, including the environment it is growing in. The second line about the uterus the baby grows in refers to this element of environmental influence on growth.

We are all more than our genes. The community we grow up in, whether or not we have access to things like money and education, clean water and healthy food, the extent to which our lives are impacted by violence and peace, all of these things influence how we grow (both physically and emotionally).

These are of course abstract ideas for young children and for most kids they probably won't come up. But for some families and some kids, this page can offer an opportunity for a conversation about nature and nurture.

**Pages 28–29: “But before a baby can be born it has to get bigger, and bigger, and BIGGER. This usually takes about forty weeks.”**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

It was an intentional choice to leave out details about the actual size of the fetus through development or the common experiences of pregnancy. I made this choice for a few reasons.

First of all, not all of us who are reading to our children will have been present during some or all of the pregnancy, or be the one that birthed them or even have been present at their birth.

Secondly, the standard developmental markers are so general as to actually describe only a small proportion of the actual courses of fetal development. We aren’t all the size of a peach at 12 weeks! Also, those standard markers erase the difficult parts of pregnancy (paralyzing nausea, depression, pain, etc.), which I did not want to do.

Instead the page is laid out to allow parents to fill in however much or little of the fetal development story they can or want to share.

#### TALKING POINTS

Any adult reader can also add in information about common experiences of pregnancy through the various stages highlighted on this page.

Some parents will share things like:

At this point I really had to start peeing a lot more.

When you were as big as that picture I wanted to eat all sorts of things, like \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.

When you were between 7 weeks and 12 weeks, we got worried you might not be born. But you were!

#### MORE INFORMATION

If a child is curious, you may want to bring in another book that offers more details about fetal development and/or experience of pregnancy.

If you’d like to be able to fill in some of the blanks for your child, see the resource section for books that feature detailed information on fetal development.

**Pages 30–31: “Sometimes the baby is ready to come out on its own. Sometimes a midwife or doctor will be the one to say it is time for the baby to be born. No matter who decides, the baby does not just hop out by itself.”**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

It was important for me to include many different kinds of births, and so in addition to describing childbirth that begins with spontaneous labor, we acknowledge here that it might be a midwife or a doctor who makes the call.

And no matter how much I like the image of a baby just hopping out by itself, we need to let kids know that’s not how it happens.

Also this page was important because the next page depicts the moment of birth and I felt like we all needed a moment to get ready for it!

#### TALKING POINTS

You may want to point out how the fetus has grown now, and even flip back to the fetal development spread on pages 28–29. You could point out that the fetus is now in a different position, one that’s easier to be born in (although we cheated a bit here because we wanted the fetus to be facing the reader).

#### MORE INFORMATION

This page offers an opportunity for adult readers who know the circumstances of the child’s birth to share some of that. Did the fetus start the process? Was it a midwife or doctor?

Were there any older siblings waiting?

The illustration also highlights the division between a fetus that’s still inside a body and children who have been born and are now grown, on the outside. The next page finds the baby being born, so this is the last time it’s still inside the uterus.

The illustration includes an umbilical cord. Some children might notice this, some might not. Either way, it’s an opportunity to explain that the umbilical cord is the way that the fetus gets nutrients while it is growing, that it’s a thing which connects the birth parent to the child, and that when the child is born and can breath and feed on its own, the cord is cut and forms the belly button.



**Page 32:**            **“Some babies are born by coming out through a part of the body that most people call the vagina.”**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

I wanted all parents to be able to share the birth story in a way that actually works for them. Most books require you to use one set of words, and that doesn't work for all of us and anyway, it's not necessary.

It's never too early for kids to learn that language is context specific. Most people (who speak English) call the part of the body that a baby comes out through the vagina. Some people might say the baby comes out of the vulva (although because the vulva is external it's not the way I would describe it). This book isn't a medical lesson, so there's no reason why everyone needs to use the same word. And for children who are curious, learning that there's more than one word is actually a bigger and better lesson.

One example that was important for me is tied to gender. Because body parts are often gendered, some of us will have parts but not feel like the gendered term fits. So trans dads who have a uterus and chose to carry a child and give birth may not ever use the word vagina, and they shouldn't have to unless they want to.

This book is an opportunity to use the language that fits for us as well as explain different words other people use. It's also a chance to simply point out that we all describe things in different ways, and those differences are interesting and worth learning about.

#### TALKING POINTS

You might ask a child where they think this birth is happening. Is it on a bed? On the floor? What else do they notice? Do they notice that the person helping the baby be born is wearing gloves (one of the only commonalities with the illustration on the next page)?

#### MORE INFORMATION

This illustration depicts a home birth. Because the circumstances of birth vary so much from one country to another we didn't include any tools a midwife might have, although certainly it's safe to describe this as a scene of a midwife delivering a baby in a home.

Some children may comment that the person giving birth seems to be squatting or sitting. They may think this is unusual if they have been exposed to conventional media images of childbirth, which are usually in a hospital, or sometimes in a bed, with the person giving birth lying on their back.

From the perspective of midwives and many other health care professionals squatting or sitting is a much easier position from which to deliver a child.

**Page 33:**           **“And other times doctors will make a special opening below the belly button, take the baby out, and then close up the hole.”**

#### MORE INFORMATION

In order to keep it simple, this page shows a C-section hospital birth. Of course many children are born vaginally in hospitals as well, and this is something worth pointing out. If you are reading this with a child whose birth you know about, you can use both images to put together the story of how they were born (e.g. you were born in a hospital like the blue page, but coming out through the vagina, like on the orange page).

Depending on the age of the child you are reading to this page offers an opportunity to give more details including introducing the term C-section, and the idea of a surgical procedure where doctors would wear masks (notice the midwife is not wearing a mask), and patients wear slippers, etc.

**Pages 34–35:**   **“Whichever way the baby comes out, it is a pretty big deal for the baby. It is also a pretty big deal for the people who waited and waited and *waited* for the baby to be born. Sometimes it takes a long time, sometimes it is quick, sometimes it hurts a little, and sometimes it hurts *a lot*. But usually everyone needs a lot of rest afterwards.”**

#### WHY I WROTE IT THAT WAY

I wanted to tell the birth story in a way that was open to include parents who weren't directly involved in the birth. Whether we have adopted, we used a surrogate, or we were a biological parent who wasn't there at the birth, all expectant parents go through some common feelings and experiences, and these pages are written to highlight those experiences.

It's also written in a way to include family and community members (who are represented in silhouette) who for some of us are crucial players in the birth story.

#### TALKING POINTS

Most kids love to look at faces. You can explain to them that the face is a person who is giving birth, and ask them what they think the face looks like. Not all kids are adept at recognizing emotion on faces so it's also an opportunity to match the words in the text with the face.

#### MORE INFORMATION

Here you might want to share a few examples of how long it takes for babies to be born. Maybe you have some people in your life who your child knows and you can use them as examples (“Your Aunt Emi was born very quickly, so quickly that the doctor didn’t have time to get there” or “Your cousin Sam didn’t want to come out and we waited two whole days for Sam to be born!”)

#### **Pages 36–37: “Who was waiting for you to be born?”**

This final page offers a chance to reinforce the idea that no matter how a child is born, who gave birth to the child, and who was there the moment of birth, there are usually lots of people waiting for the child to be born and to eventually come to the family they are now in. The experience of waiting is something that all people who choose to be parents can identify with, and this last page gives you a chance to share something about the excitement, nervousness, and love that lies behind the waiting.

It’s also an opportunity to talk to the child about who the trusted people are in their community. The people who were waiting for them to be born and who are still in their lives today.

# Key Topics

## 3.1 TALKING ABOUT DIFFERENT METHODS OF REPRODUCTION

It's likely that at some point in reading *What Makes a Baby*, the child you are reading to will ask about the circumstances of their birth. And if they don't bring it up, right there on page 24 the book prompts you, the adult reader, to share a bit of the story by asking, "Who helped bring together the sperm and egg that made you?"

If you haven't already, you might want to read section 2, the page-by-page guide, for ideas on how to frame the story of the child's conception and birth, and also for ways to explicitly include your own values in the story. Below are examples of how you might start describing different methods of reproduction for very young children.

If your child is older and/or more curious, you'll probably need to bring in another book or resource. *What Makes a Baby* was written to help with those first conversations, but most children will benefit from words and pictures that more specifically explain things like sperm/egg donation, storage, fertilization, and other reproductive technology that may have been a part of how you made a baby. You'll find plenty of resources in section 4.

Remember, this isn't meant to be a script to follow, just some ideas to get your own creative juices flowing. The examples below are written as if you are a parent reading to your child, but they are meant to be helpful for all grown-up readers.

One last note: most of us find stories a lot easier to understand and remember than facts. Even if you think you're being called on to give your child the "facts" of who the sperm and/or egg came from, you can always answer in the form of a story—one that includes why and when, not just who.

#### SPERM OR EGG DONATION (KNOWN DONOR)

Even if you know the sperm or egg donor that helped you make your child, you may not go into all the details about who the donor is the first time you read this story with your child. If you want to wait for your child to ask more, an opening story might be something like this:

Mommy wanted you, but I didn't have sperm, so a very special person helped us make you by giving me some of their sperm.

Daddy had the sperm but needed an egg to make you. Someone helped us by giving us an egg, and then we had a lot of help from other people, kind of like doctors, who helped us get that egg and make you!

Every child is different, and the above explanations might be more than enough for the time being. Kids will want to know more, but as long as they know they can ask, you may choose to leave it there.

Or, if the child knows the donor already and you want them to know that this person helped make them, you could also introduce that now. For example:

I had a lot of help getting the sperm and egg that made you together. We got your sperm from Uncle Jack, and then the doctor helped us get your sperm into Mommy's body so it could meet with my egg and eventually make you.

The egg that made you was in my body. The sperm that helped make you didn't come from your papa's body, but he did bring it home and helped me get the egg and sperm together, here at home.

The sperm came from my body, but Mama's eggs weren't cooperating, so your Auntie Nan gave us one of her eggs, which was a pretty special gift to give. It helped us make you.

If the child wants to know more specifically *how* the sperm and egg got into the uterus, a good first description might be something like:

Uncle Jack gave us some sperm, which we put in something like a little cup. I put a special tube in the cup that could hold onto some of the sperm. Then I helped mama put the tube into her vagina so we could get the sperm out of the tube and though her vagina into her uterus, which is where you grew.

Doctors helped us get the sperm and egg together, and then once they met and did their dance and became one brand new

thing, then the doctor helped us get this new thing into my uterus using a special kind of tube that goes into my vagina.

Remember that a child is *not* only the result of the genetic material that made them. Regardless of where that genetic material came from, as a parent you had a role in bringing this child into being and helping them become the child that is in front of you today. Any story about how they came to be can, and I would say should, centre you and your child. There will always be time later for teaching the science of reproduction. Start with the basics and start with your experience.

#### SPERM OR EGG DONATION (UNKNOWN DONOR)

Very young children know what they know, and as importantly, they don't know what they don't know. You may feel anxious about not having answers to your child's question about where the sperm and/or egg came from that made them. But most young children won't have that anxiety because they haven't yet learned that there was anything unique about the way they came to be.

From that perspective, what is important is to let this story be as anxiety-free as possible, and to let it be about the things you do know that you can share. Two ways to start the conversation might be:

I really wanted to make a baby but I didn't have any sperm. So I went to a place that helps grown-ups find sperm to make babies, and they sent me the sperm that helped make you.

We had the sperm but we needed an egg to make you. We found an amazing place that helped us get the egg we used to make you.

If a child wants to know more about where the sperm or egg came from, you'll need to decide what you want to say. Below are a few examples, but they are specific and may not reflect how you feel or how or why you came to have an unknown donor, so use them only as a guide:

Well, I only know a few things about the body that the egg that made you came from. I didn't really want to know too much because what was most important to me was knowing who your parents and family and community would be. And that's us!

Your sperm came from someone who went to a clinic that helps people like me, who want to have a baby but who don't have sperm. That person donated the sperm and then the

clinic held onto it very carefully until I found them and asked for the sperm. I'm very glad they did that, because that's how I made you!

Very young children may not want to know more. If the child wants to know more specifically HOW the sperm and egg got into the uterus, a good first description might be something like:

The sperm and egg that made you first came together in a special container in the hospital. Then Doctor Ward helped get the sperm and egg into my uterus by using a small tube that goes into my vagina and up into my uterus, which is where you grew.

(Note: you can flip ahead to pages 28–29 to see drawings of what happened during those nine months.)

#### ART, ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY (NO SPERM OR EGG DONATION)

If your child was born using you and your partner's egg and sperm, but with the help of some sort of reproductive technology, you probably won't get into many details with a very young child, as they usually aren't interested in the specifics of the scientific procedures.

You can share the fact that the sperm and egg came from you and your partner, and that you had help getting them together. Here are some examples:

We made you using our sperm and egg, but we needed some help getting the sperm and egg to meet and getting them into my uterus, which is where you grew. A doctor helped us do all of that.

We had a few people help us bring together the sperm and egg that made you. First we went to a place where they helped us get the sperm and egg out of our bodies. They put them together in a special kind of container, which is very small and very clean. Then we went back and they put the very tiny thing, which grew into you, into your mom's uterus.

(Note: you can flip ahead to pages 28–29 to see drawings of what happened during those nine months.)

## SURROGACY

Very young children have no idea of the complexity involved in deciding to use a surrogate, in finding one, and then in the relationship among parents, the surrogacy agency (if one was used), and their surrogate.

You probably don't need to get into this with your four-, six-, or eight-year-old. But you can lay the groundwork for future conversations by telling a story that establishes your roles as a parent or parents in making the decision, anticipating the birth, and supporting the child from the very beginning.

Here are a few examples of what that could sound like:

We had the sperm we needed to make you, but we didn't have an egg, and we had nowhere for you to grow—no uterus. So we thought and thought and decided that we would get help. A woman named Jackie helped us make you by carrying you in her uterus for nine months.

We had an egg and a sperm but we didn't have a place for you to grow, the uterus. We found a group of people who helped us find someone who did have a uterus and helped us make you by carrying our sperm and egg in her uterus for about ten months.

Very young children may not want to know more. Your child might want to know more, like where that person is now. This is a decision you'll have to make, based in part on the circumstances and relationship you have with the surrogate.

If the child wants to know more specifically HOW the sperm and egg got into the uterus, a good first description might be something like:

Once we found Del, who helped by carrying you in her uterus for the first ten months, we all went to the doctor's office. The doctor took the sperm and egg we had, mixed them together, and then put them into Del's uterus. And there you stayed and grew and grew, just like in the book.

(Note: you can flip ahead to pages 28–29 to see drawings of what happened during those nine months.)

## ADOPTION

If you have adopted a child, you may already have language that you use to talk about the biological parent(s) that you adopted your child from. I recommend looking at some of the books for kids about adoption (some



are listed in the resource section) and having at least one of those books available to help you talk more about adoption with your child.

Explaining the specifics of birth for an adopted child can be a challenge because you might not know very much about the circumstances of your child's conception. But if your child is asking (and at some point even if they aren't) it's important not to avoid this topic even though it can be uncomfortable or painful.

When you get to page 24, where you are prompted to share the story of how the egg and sperm got together, you might feel stuck.

If you don't know a lot, or aren't ready to share any details with your child at this point, here are two opening statements you could make in response to the question about who helped bring the sperm and egg together:

I wasn't there when the sperm and egg came together to make you. I found you and you found me and we became a family after you were born.

The sperm and egg that came together to make you didn't come from me or your mom. We wanted a baby but didn't have the sperm or the egg. We got very lucky and with the help of some other people we found you while you were still growing in the uterus of the woman who gave birth to you.

Hopefully what this book allows you to do is separate for a child the difference between the people who were the child's biological parents (i.e. the ones that provided genetic material), and the people who are that child's parent(s), family, and community.

For young children, the most important message is that we're all born and raised with the help of many people, and the people around you are people who love you.

#### INTERCOURSE

Sometimes parents who conceived via intercourse can feel as if telling the story of conception means explaining sexual activities and adult sexuality. This isn't the case.

Young children have no idea what sex means to adults. And a young child doesn't need to know. (Believe me, that time will come before you know it!) Just as with other methods of reproduction, for very young children, there's no need to get into the details of sexual behaviors.

Below are a few examples of how you might begin to describe this way that the sperm and egg come together in response to the question, "Who helped bring together the sperm and egg that made you?"

Your mommy and daddy brought the sperm and egg together all on their own, by helping each other. We did this using our bodies, and didn't get help from anyone else.

We got a little help from someone who made sure that the egg and the sperm that made you were ready, but other than that we did it on our own. The sperm and egg came together when we made love, which is a thing grown-ups do that lets them put their bodies so close together that they are inside one another. Sometimes when grown-ups do this, they can make a baby.

Or, if you feel like providing more details, you can be direct and specific, and let your child ask questions if they have them:

We made you with sperm from your dad and an egg from your mom. Your mom's vagina and your dad's penis fit together, and when they do, the sperm can go from your dad's body to your mom's—where the egg is. They eventually found their way to the uterus, and that's where you grew!

(Note: you can flip ahead to pages 28–29 to see drawings of what happened during those nine months.)

### **3.2 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MAKING BABIES AND BEING A PARENT**

We were very intentional with the language that we chose for this book, and we talk about “making babies” for a reason.

Because most young children don't know the details of how babies are made, they don't know that there's a difference between where the genetic material comes from and who helped get it together. And, just as important, they don't know there's a difference between making a baby and being a parent.

This book is a great opportunity to explain the differences to your child in a way that is honest, that works for their comprehension level, and that can help them better understand the world around them.

Making a baby describes all the things that have to happen to bring a child into the world. So yes, the person who has the sperm and the person who has the egg are a part of making a baby. But if you think about the big picture, it's almost never just two people. Family, friends, and community offered needed support (before, during, or after the decision to conceive). There are often midwives and/or medical professionals. People helped

cover work shifts, brought over meals, made you laugh when you thought you were going to completely lose it while waiting for this baby to arrive.

Not all these people provided the same kind of help or the same amount of help, but they were all part of making that baby come into the world.

This seems to me a much more honest and accurate description of making babies than saying that the only people who make babies are biological parents who, intentionally or not, conceive. As any parent knows, being a PARENT is something else entirely. Showing up and being present and responsive day after day, doing your best, failing and trying again, struggling through the hard times with little or no acknowledgment—all of these things and much more are what makes someone a parent. And none of these have to do with whether or not you contributed biologically to the processes of conception, gestation, and birth.

Being a parent involves a choice. We all know that some people who made babies do not end up being parents. For lots of reasons, they don't have a role in raising them and helping them develop into who they will be. They don't pass on their values and knowledge. They may have helped make a baby, but they are not a parent.

*What Makes a Baby* doesn't deal with this topic explicitly, but it was written and illustrated to give you a chance to talk with young children about this difference. Below are some ways you might start that conversation.

For sighted children, you can use the pictures to start a conversation about the difference between making a baby and being a parent (or you might call it making a family). You can look at the illustrations of the birth on pages 32–33 and then look at the park illustration on pages 24–25. Point out all the different kinds of family configurations in the park and the things they are doing together. Talk about the things you do that make you a parent, or the things you do together that make you a family.

A single parent might say something like this:

See, these people are making babies, which is hard work and really important too. You were born this way, and a lot of people helped me make you. Now look at the families in the park. You see how they're playing together, or maybe these two people are going off to school, or to the doctor. This is the stuff we do together because I'm your parent and we're a family. I helped you be born, but so did lots of other people. But I'm your only parent, which is a special relationship we have.

A parent who isn't biologically related to their child might say something like this:

I helped make you because I brought the sperm home to Mommy and helped get it inside of her. The sperm didn't come from my body, so we had other people help make you. But I'm your dad because of all the things we do now. Parents are the people who help you grow up, which is what I started doing as soon as you were born, and am still doing today.

A parent who adopted or used a surrogate might share it this way:

It wasn't going to work for me to make you on my own, but I started thinking of you even before you were born. All of us have people who helped us be born and parents who help us grow up. For some kids those are the same people, and for some they are different. So we talk about [birth parent or surrogate] as the person who gave birth to you, and we talk about ourselves as a family, and us as your parents.

Every parent will need to find their own way and own words, but the point is to help children understand that there is a difference between being made and being raised, and to not think that in either case it's really only one or two people involved.

### **3.3 TALKING ABOUT DIFFERENCE**

When you think about it, we're all a little bit different from each other. If you wanted to, you could point out something that is different between you and every other person on the planet.

But we don't usually do that. Instead we focus on certain similarities and spot only some kinds of difference. We usually only spot the differences to which we ascribe special social, cultural, or even moral meaning. By ignoring all the other endless differences, it's easy to make most people seem the same as each other and to single out only some people as different.

This is something we learn to do as children. We single out people based on what they look like, how they move, how they sound, how they think. And usually the way we do this actually hurts other people by making them feel left out. We've probably all had this experience.

It's possible to help children think about difference . . . well, differently. *What Makes a Baby* was written and illustrated to help you do that.

On every page you'll see a lot of different things going on. Children may point out things that they recognize, and they may also point out things that are unfamiliar.

The book is intentional in creating a lot of difference, which allows you as the adult reader to answer their questions and also point out that whatever difference they are singling out, there are even more differences to notice.

Here's one example: on page 25, there is an illustration of lots of different kinds of people at a park. You probably notice that there's one person who uses a wheelchair to get around. One way to point out difference on this page is *only* to point out the person using the wheelchair. But a new way would be to point out that there are all sorts of different ways that people are moving through the park:

Look at this person using a wheelchair. There's someone else using a skateboard, and another riding a bike. Can you see other ways people are getting around?

Instead of singling out the person who uses a wheelchair, we can educate our children about things like using wheelchairs while also pointing out that we all do things in our own way. Using a wheelchair isn't the same as using a skateboard, especially because people using wheelchairs and people using skateboards are not usually treated as the same kind of person. But thinking about all of the differences around us can help children, and the rest of us, see more than the differences that single people out. Many of us have shared experiences, like going to the park, but who we go with, what we do when we're there, and how we get there and get home, is a reflection of our unique experience.

And importantly, one experience isn't necessarily better than another. (After all, the person in the wheelchair is going to be much faster than the person walking, so if speed is what you want, walking isn't as good!)

### **3.4 TALKING ABOUT DEVELOPMENT**

Even before our children are born there is pressure to scrutinize their development and measure it against social and physical norms. How much are they growing? How fast? How well compared to other fetuses? And as soon as they are born it gets worse. When will they crawl, walk, run, speak, read, write, stop using diapers, start going to bed on their own, and on and on and on!

If the goal is to raise healthy and happy humans, a lot of the focus on development doesn't really help.

For a lot of children and parents, society's focus on development is a struggle. Our society prefers that development be linear and predictable. But many unpredictable things like illness, injury, and disability introduce diversity and difference, which may be a struggle but is also part of the beauty of being human.

Page 25, which asks the question "Who was happy that it was *you* who grew?" is an opportunity not only to tell the child how happy you were they were born and are alive today, but also to share with them what you love about the way they grew, even if those things you love are the kinds of things other people consider sad, tragic, or different in a bad way.

It's a chance to point out that things that others might think of as a problem—the way a child sees, or hears, or moves, or the way a child thinks or communicates—may also be a source of resilience or other beloved qualities.

Pages 26–27 provide an opportunity to open up a conversation about how we grow and develop. It's a chance to show that there are many ways to grow. Sometimes growing is about size (which you'll see on pages 28 and 29). But you can't always tell growth from size. For example, a fully-grown Shih Tzu might be smaller than a puppy St. Bernard. So how do you know if a thing is growing? Or fully-grown?

These ideas will be too complicated for most young children, but for some curious children who want to know more, they can open up an amazing conversation.

### **3.5 TALKING ABOUT GENDER**

*What Makes a Baby* takes a unique approach toward gender (well, unique for kids' books about reproduction at least).

You may have noticed that in the first part of the book there are no references to gender at all. And when it comes time for the person to give birth I've also used gender-neutral language. This is intentional. I wrote the book that way so it would work as a book for people of all genders to read with their kids.

But that doesn't mean that gender isn't important, it is. And once you get to the middle of the book, on pages 24–25 you'll find people and those people all have genders. Reading *What Makes a Baby* offers many opportunities to talk about gender with children. It gives you an opportunity to challenge some gender stereotypes and assumptions and it also gives you

an opportunity, even at an early age, to model for a child a more critical way of thinking about gender. Below are some examples.

#### EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SEX AND GENDER

Most children of a certain age will assume that bodies with sperm are men and bodies with eggs are women. If they already know the names for body parts they'll probably also assume that the men—with sperm—have penises, and that the women—with eggs—have vulvas and/or vaginas.

The illustrations on pages 6–21 intentionally don't show genitals or other gendered features. While it's true that most bodies with eggs also have a vulva, vagina, and uterus, and are called female bodies, it's not true for ALL bodies with eggs. And while it's true that most bodies with sperm also have a penis and testicles, and are called male bodies, it's not true for ALL bodies with sperm. Understanding the difference between sex (as defined by our chromosomes and body parts) and gender (the way we think, feel, and express ourselves across a spectrum of masculinity, femininity, and beyond) will be too much for most young children. But there are opportunities to plant seeds. Here are a few examples: A child may look at one of the bodies with sperm and say that it's a boy. You might choose to respond by asking:

How do you know it's a boy?

There are no right or wrong answers here of course, because you are talking about how they think, and what's most useful is to have the conversation. The body is just a body, so it could be a boy or a girl or something in between. Who knows!

It can also be helpful to explain diversity to a child who won't likely know that there are in fact many genders. That might go something like this:

Well, that body could be a boy, but really all we know is that it has sperm. Most people who have bodies with sperm call themselves a boy or a man. But some don't. Some women may have been born with bodies with sperm in them, but they are still women.

Another way of explaining it could be:

Bodies are so amazing, and even though we tend to divide them into two kinds—boys and girls, or men and women—there are actually way more ways that our bodies work and feel, and some people feel best moving from one to the other, or being somewhere in between.

For most very young children, this is going to be more than enough for them to think about, and they may not ever really care about any of it. What's important is not that they must know this or that thing about gender. What's important is that they know you are someone they can talk to about it, and that there are lots of options for living a healthy and happy life when it comes to bodies, sex, and gender expression.

Whenever you find yourself answering questions about people's bodies, it is good to remind the child you are talking to that these conversations are usually private ones, and that it's great to talk with family (or wherever you choose to set the boundary) but that it wouldn't be nice to ask a stranger or a friend at school or teacher about whether their body has this or that.

#### WHAT GENDER LOOKS LIKE

In the second half of the book, there are many characters whose genders are more apparent. But you'll find a lot of the characters might be read as more than one gender. This is partly the style of illustrator Fiona Smyth, but it was also one of the reasons I wanted to work with her.

If you want to use the book to talk about gender presentation, or what gender looks like, you can pay attention to how the child you are reading to labels people in the book, and ask them why. Is it because of facial hair? Because they think they see a breast? Are they assuming that the person holding a baby is a woman and a mom? Is the kid with long hair a girl?

There are no right or wrong answers here, and the point is not to create anxiety or mystery about gender. Instead it can be fun and interesting simply to think through with children how we identify gender and why.

With very young children, this exercise will be less interesting because they probably don't care. But if you are inclined to challenge gender assumptions and norms, the illustrations let you do that even with very young children.

### **3.6 TALKING ABOUT RACE**

The illustrations in the book are very true to Fiona Smyth's style as a painter, illustrator, and graphic artist. One of the things I love about her work is the way she represents bodies, gender, ethnicity, and race.

It's up to you to decide if you want to talk about these things with your child. A comment or question from a child about the appearance of bodies in the book may be any of these things, and it's up to you where you go with your answer.



But *What Makes a Baby* definitely gives you an opportunity to talk about race and ethnicity with a child if you want to. Below are some examples.

We've heard children ask questions like:

How come that baby is purple and the other one is pink?

and

How come no one is a real color?

These questions are probably about many things (including what they expect books to look like). But whatever sparked them, these questions are an opening to talk about race because they are about the skin color of a character and whether that color means something.

If you decide to talk about race, it's important, of course, to decide what you want to say. And it's important to remember that a young child's understanding of race isn't the same as an adult's. The book is not designed to convey a specific message about race or ethnicity, but it is created in a way that could allow for a lot of different kinds of lessons. Here are a few example responses to the above questions:

I'm not sure why one baby is pink and the other is purple. I notice that the purple baby is coming out of a body that's also purple, although not exactly the same purple. And the pink baby is coming out of a body that looks kind of blue. Like it said earlier, the color we are when we come out has to do with the stories from the sperm and egg we came from.

Well it's true that you don't see many people with bright blue or purple skin, but when you really look at people, we come in a pretty amazing range of colors. For some people, the color you are matters a lot— like maybe it helps them feel connected to their family and their community—and for some people it might not matter so much.

After starting the conversation, you might choose to ask your child questions about their own awareness of skin color. (Depending on age they may have a lot, a little, or no awareness of this. You might also choose to share some of your own values around race, or ethnicity, or other kinds of difference.

### 3.7 TALKING ABOUT BODIES AND DISABILITY

#### BODIES

We talk a lot about bodies in *What Makes a Baby*. And you'll notice that there are all kinds of bodies in the book.

From a very early age, children are exposed to the real diversity of bodies in the world. Our size and shape, our hairstyles and skin tones, our limbs and how we move around—the variety is endless, and it's all out there in the world around us.

Yet from just as early an age, most children are exposed to media that present only pared-down or idealized versions of bodies in board books, picture books, children's television, not to mention all the adult books and magazines they encounter. And almost all of this material shows a very different story about bodies. Most bodies in the media are white and skinny, and the ones that aren't are usually either considered extra special or singled out in one way or another.

Unfortunately what can happen is that after seeing the uniform image of people that the mainstream media offers, we can stop seeing diversity around us.

We can help children make sense of this strange contrast by making sure they have lots of alternative books and images in their lives, and we can also help by pointing out diversity when we recognize it in the world.

As you're reading the book with a child, if you find them talking about bodies, be sure to point out all the different kinds of bodies on the page, particularly the later pages. Encourage them to look at and talk about the different kinds of bodies, and be sure to share something positive about each of them.

#### DISABILITY

*What Makes a Baby* was written to give adults an opportunity to share both a personal story and a universal one—and to talk about things that we sometimes don't talk about, even though they happen to all of us.

Disability is kind of like that. Disability is part of everyday life. If you aren't currently disabled and don't have someone in your life who is, you might not notice it, but it's everywhere.

We keep that hidden from our children, usually because we think it's too dark or negative, or because we think it's too complicated for our kids to understand.

We do that with sexuality too. And in both cases, the drawback is that we aren't really preparing our kids to be in the world with others. By not talking about things we are actually saying a lot. We're saying "those"

people are different: they have their own stories and their own world and it's just too different for us to pay attention to.

It's true that people with disabilities have their own stories and their own experiences of the world. But it's not true that they're so unimaginably different from able-bodied people. Some things are different, and a lot of things are the same. Your child might ask a question about a wheelchair or leg brace. A young child might not know what they are. An older child might point them out as being "special."

Each case is an opportunity to reframe disability and bodily difference for your children. Rather than only pointing out the difference you can also point out some similarities. Rather than only saying something negative, you can say something positive as well. Here are a few examples:

Example 1: A child points to the crutch used by one of the children on page 31, and asks, "What's that?" A simple answer would be, "It's a crutch. It's something people use to help them get around." But you could take it further and offer:

It's a crutch. It's something people use to help them get around.  
You know how we use a stroller to help us get you around?  
And your uncle uses a cane sometimes? It's like that.

This second answer provides the same information but doesn't (incorrectly) suggest that only people who have disabilities need and use help from others. We all do, just at different times and in different ways.

Example 2: A child points out the wheelchair on page 24. "Look, that kid is in a wheelchair. Why is she in a wheelchair?" A short answer might be:

I don't know why she's in a wheelchair, but the reason people use wheelchairs is to help them get around. Maybe she hurt her leg, or maybe she never was able to use her legs to walk.

But you could also take the opportunity to point out the many ways we all get around—not ignoring your child's question, but offering a bigger context. You could continue:

Who else do you notice in the park? What other ways are people getting through the park? Let's see if we can count them.

It's not about pretending that there aren't people in the world who use assistive devices to get around or encouraging your child to ignore that or pretend they don't.

Erasing our differences doesn't really work, and kids know that. But by offering information both about the differences and the similarities, you can affirm the fact that there are lots of different ways to live a happy and healthy life, not just one.

# Resources

## 4.1 GLOSSARY

Different people use different words to describe themselves and to describe others. And then professionals can use words in yet other ways that they may or may not explain to us. This is confusing for most adults and very young children too.

As a sex educator, I do not believe it's my place to tell people what words to use to describe themselves. And I don't believe there is ever one right word to use. But sometimes we don't know what words mean. Particularly if there are words used by people who aren't part of our close communities or families, it can feel as if there is a right word and a wrong word, and it can be stressful to know which is which.

Below is a brief explanation of a few of the terms used in the reader's guide. These explanations aren't meant to be the final word on these words. Think of them as a place to start. Remember that language is always evolving. What's most important is to start with respect and check with the people you are talking to about the language they use.

### BIOLOGICAL OR PHYSICAL SEX

The word sex has many meanings. A lot of the confusion that happens when we talk about sexuality is that we aren't careful to make sure that we all mean the same thing when we talk about sex.

One definition of sex is the biological or physical sex that we are assigned at birth (or sometimes before birth). Most of the time, the options for sex are man or woman. The truth is that there are more than two options, although that doesn't get talked about in public as much.

If our sex is defined at birth, it happens when the person assisting in the birth looks at our body; if they see something that looks like a penis,

they say, “It’s a boy,” and if they see something that looks like a vulva, they say, “It’s a girl.”

Sometimes this announcement is made before we’re born: during an ultrasound examination, if the technician views the baby and sees something that looks like a penis, they say, “You’re having a boy”; if they don’t, it’s, “You’re having a girl.”

Of course, not all of our bodies look the same when we’re born, and even though they only give us two options—man or woman—some of us are born with bodies that don’t fit that binary. In these cases, even though there may be nothing at all wrong with the way our infant bodies work, an infant may be labeled as intersex, and that infant’s body can be immediately assumed to be in trouble, and in need of fixing. This incorrect (and dangerous) assumption is slowly changing, though it isn’t changing everywhere. Despite the fact that, based on visual assessment, there are more than two options for an infant’s sex, the medical community and the general public still think of sex as being defined as either man or woman.

Another way that sex is determined is through our genes, or DNA, where doctors will identify which sex chromosomes we have. With this definition, we are once again forced into one of two categories. If a baby is born with two X chromosomes, it is called “female,” and if a baby is born with one X and one Y chromosome, it is identified as “male.” What’s particularly odd about this is that we have known for some time that these aren’t the only two options.

Some people are born with two Xs and a Y, some people are born with one X and two Ys, and some people are born with only one X. All of these people are identified as having “chromosomal abnormalities.” Because our chromosomes are not routinely examined at birth, the first sex label we get is a physical one. If at some point in the future our bodies aren’t developing in a way that matches what we were told our sex was, tests may be performed to determine our genetic or biological sex.

Slowly but surely, the medical and mental health professions are acknowledging some things that regular people have known forever: sex is not a simple binary option, we don’t all fit neatly into one of two categories, our chromosomes may or may not match what our bodies are expected to look like, and it’s possible that neither may match how we feel about ourselves. People can also live happy and healthy lives if they are supported to understand how these definitions of sex relate to their own understanding of their sex.

## GENDER

People often confuse the words sex and gender. Usually when we use the word sex to describe a person, we are talking about their physical body, and their genetic makeup. Sex in this context describes genitals and chromosomes. Gender is a term used to describe the social and cultural meaning we ascribe to the bodies we have. Sex and gender may be related, but they aren't the same thing.

Gender isn't biological. It's something we experience in our bodies, but it's also something that is experienced outside our bodies. Gender can refer to social expectations and stereotypes about being masculine or feminine, it can refer to our own internal experience of our bodies and these social expectations, and gender also refers to the conscious and unconscious ways we express how we feel in the world.

Gender isn't an either/or choice. Most people still think that there are only binary options for gender, male or female, masculine or feminine. This isn't accurate. There are many different ways that gender is expressed, and we know that while all children explore gender roles, for some people gender is fixed throughout their lives, while for others it is fluid and changes.

Despite society's efforts to force us into one of two boxes, most people challenge gender expectations or roles in some way. Some of us do this more obviously and explicitly than others, but none of us can fit the expectations of "real men" or "real women" all the time. And to make matters more complicated, social expectations are always changing and being challenged. So what makes a "real man" in the 1970s may be very different from what makes a real man in the 2010s, even in the same community.

The only constant when it comes to gender is that we are supposed to follow someone else's rules and "fit in"—meaning that our gender expression should match people's expectations of our gender based on what we look and sound like, and how we move through the world.

Some of us are better at fitting in than others, or at seeming like we are following the rules. It is usually the people who visibly don't fit expectations about gender that are most punished in any culture. Sometimes punishment means being left out; other times it means being the victim of violence.

Currently, there is active debate about these ideas and terms for gender. While it might seem easier if we could all agree on one, five, or twelve definitions, the result would never be as useful or good.

## TRANSGENDER

Transgender is a broad or umbrella term that refers to people whose gender identity in some way is not the same as the gender they were ascribed at birth.

This may or may not mean that a person chooses to live as one particular gender, or as a gender that is different than what they were called when they were born. Instead it describes an experience or reality that doesn't match up neatly with the thing you were first called. Lots of people use the term transgender to describe either their gender identity or their experience of gender, including people who are androgynous, transsexual, cross-dressers, and folks who in other ways don't conform to the gender binary.

What usually distinguishes the term transgender from transsexual is, first, that it encompasses a wider range of gender expression, and, second, that people who identify as transgender may not want to transition fully to some other gender.

This is a very general definition, and it's important to remember that no definition is going to fit for everyone. If you are interested in learning about terminology because you want to be able to use language that will open up conversations rather than shut them down, it's important to read many different perspectives, and particularly perspectives from people who use the word transgender to identify themselves.

## CISGENDER

Cisgender is one of many terms used to describe one's gender identity. (Others include transgender, gender queer, androgynous, and more.) Cisgender refers to people whose gender identity matches how they were identified at birth.

The terms "trans" and "cis" are commonly used in science, where "trans" means "across" or "on the opposite side of," whereas "cis" means "on the same side of."

The term is used in a similar way in the context of gender: someone whose experience involves crossing from one gender to another is "trans," while someone whose experience is of being on the one side is "cis."

So, for example, if you were born and they called you a boy, and you are now an adult and you identify as a man, then your gender identity might be referred to as cisgender.



## 4.2 BOOKS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND WEBSITES

The resources below are not all materials that I personally recommend. Some of them I may not agree with in terms of how they present their material and many take a more “traditional” approach to the topic of reproduction, sexuality, and gender. But more options are usually better than fewer, and I don’t think I’m in a position to judge what will work best for you or your family. Books are limited to those written for similar comprehension level as *What Makes a Baby*. Suggestions for additions are always welcome.

### ILLUSTRATED BOOKS ABOUT REPRODUCTION VIA INTERCOURSE

The following books center intercourse as the method of reproduction and are suitable for similar ages as *What Makes a Baby*.

*Did the Sun Shine Before You Were Born?*

By Sol Gordon, Judith Gordon, and Vivien Cohen. Prometheus Books, 1992

*It’s Not the Stork!*

By Robie Harris and Michael Emberley. Candlewick Press, 2006

*Mommy Laid an Egg: Or, Where Do Babies Come from?*

By Babette Cole. Chronicle Books, 1996

*How Was I Born?*

By Lennart Nilsson and Lena Katarina Swanberg. Dell Publishing, 1993

### PICTURE BOOKS THAT SUPPORT DIVERSE GENDER IDENTITY/PRESENTATION

*10,000 Dresses*

By Ewert Marcus and Rex Ray. Seven Stories Press, 2008

*A Girl Named Dan*

By Dandi Daley Mackall and Renee Graef. Sleeping Bear Press, 2011

*Are You a Boy or a Girl?*

By Karleen Pendleton Jimenez. Green Dragon Press, 2000

*Boys Don’t Knit!*

By Janice Schoop and Laura Beingessner. Women’s Press, 1986

*Dogs Don't Do Ballet*

By Anna Kemp and Sara Ogilvie. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2010

*It's A George Thing*

By David Bedford and Russell Julian. Egmont UK, 2008

*It's Okay to Be Different*

By Todd Parr. Little Brown Books for Young Readers, 2009

*My Princess Boy*

By Cheryl Kilodavis and Suzanne DeSimone. Aladdin, 2010

*Pink!*

By Lynne Rickards and Margaret Chamberlain. The Chicken House, 2009

*Tutus Aren't My Style*

By Linda Skeers and Anne Wilsdorf. Dial, 2010

*William's Doll*

By Charlotte Zolotow and William Pene Du Bois. Perfection Learning, 1985

BOOKS ABOUT LGBTQ IDENTITIES AND BOOKS WITH LGBTQ CHARACTERS

There are many great books for kids that include at least one LGBTQ character or in some way deal with issues around sexual orientation. Each year more books are released and so here I include two of my favorite online resources that are updated regularly.

American Library Association's Rainbow Book List, GLBTQ Books for Children and Teens:

<http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/>

Patricia Sarles, a librarian and researcher maintains a blog where she reviews and catalogues "picture books for children about the experience of knowing or having a gay parent, family member or friend":

<http://booksforkidsingayfamilies.blogspot.com/>

BOOKS ABOUT FAMILY MAKE UP

*All Kinds of Families*

By Mary Ann Hoberman and Marc Boutavant. Little Brown, and Company, 2009

*A Tale of Two Daddies*

By Vanita Oelschlager, K. Blackwood and Mike Blanc. Vanita Books, 2010

*A Tale of Two Mommies*

By Vanita Oelschlager and Mike Blanc. Vanita Books, 2011

*And Tango Makes Three*

By Justin Richardson, Peter Parnell, and Henry Cole. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005

*Antonio's Card/La Tarjeta de Antonio* (bilingual English & Spanish)

By Rigoberto Gonzalez and Cecilia Concepcion Alvarez. Children's Book Press, 2005

*Asha's Mums*

By Rosamund Elwin, Michele Paulse, and Dawn Lee. Women's Press, 2000

*Donovan's Big Day*

By Mike Dutton. Tricycle Press, 2011

*In Our Mothers' House*

By Patricia Polacco. Philomel, 2009

*Molly's Family*

By Nancy Garden and Sharon Wooding. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004

*The Family Book*

By Todd Parr. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2010

*The Great Big Book of Families*

By Mary Hoffman and Ros Asquith. Dial, 2011

*Who's in a Family?*

By Robert Skutch and Laura Nienhaus. Tricycle Press, 1997

#### BOOKS ABOUT ADOPTION

*How My Family Came to Be—Daddy, Papa and Me*

By Andrew Aldrich and Mike Motz. New Family Press, 2003

*In Our Mothers' House*

By Patricia Polacco. Philomel, 2009

*Our Gracie Aunt*

By Jacqueline Woodson and Jon J. Muth. Jump at the Sun, 2007

*Over the Moon: An Adoption Tale*

By Karen Katz. Square Fish, 2001

*Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*

By Jamie Lee Curtis and Laura Cornell. HarperCollins, 2000

*We Belong Together: A Book About Adoption and Families*

By Todd Parr. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2007

*We Wanted You*

By Liz Rosenberg and Peter Catalanotto. Roaring Brook Press, 2002

#### BOOKS ABOUT ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY AND SURROGACY

Patricia Sarles, a librarian and researcher maintains a blog where she reviews and catalogues "books for parents in English, French, German, Spanish, Hebrew, and Italian to help explain assisted conception to their children: In Vitro Fertilization, Donor Egg, Sperm, Embryo, or Surrogacy."

<http://booksfordonoroffspring.blogspot.com/>

#### ORGANIZATIONS

Colage unites people with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer parents into a network of peers and supports them as they nurture and empower each other to be skilled, self-confident, and just leaders in their communities.

<http://www.colage.org>

Family Equality Council connects, supports, and represents the one million parents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender in this country and their two million children.

<http://www.familyequality.org>

Gender Spectrum provides education, training, and support to help create a gender sensitive and inclusive environment for all children and teens.  
<http://www.genderspectrum.org>

The LGBTQ Parenting connection website provides information, resources and support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer parents, their children and communities.  
<http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca>

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is a national non-profit organization with over 200,000 members and supporters and over 350 affiliates in the United States.  
<http://www.pflag.org>

Rainbow Family Council is a volunteer community organization based in Victoria, Australia. It supports and promotes equality for “rainbow” families (parents and prospective parents who identify as lesbian, gay, bi, transgender or intersex, and their children).  
<http://www.rainbowfamilies.org.au>

Trans Youth Family Allies (TYFA) empowers children and families by partnering with educators, service providers and communities to develop supportive environments in which gender may be expressed and respected. We envision a society free of suicide and violence in which ALL children are respected and celebrated.  
<http://imatyfa.org/>