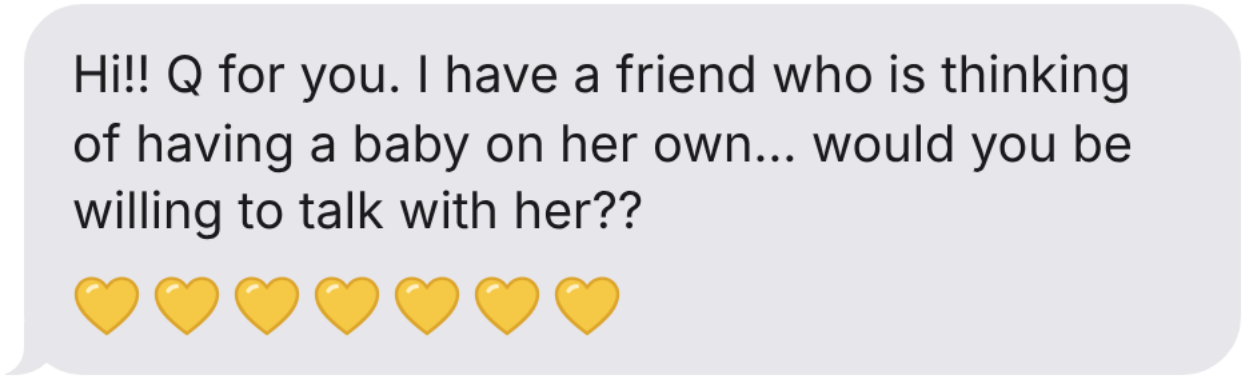
Becoming a Single Mom by Choice: What I've Learned

@Deena

Please don't post this on a public site. It has private information about me and my family, so I'd appreciate it if you only pass it along to friends you know.



About every month I get a request like this. And then I get many of the same questions from the prospective moms. "How did you pick a donor?" "What was the biggest surprise?" "What's the one thing you wish you knew?" "I'm secretly thinking about doing this. Can you tell me everything?"

Ok, yes, I can try!

This guide includes the things I find myself saying over and over.

Obvious caveat: Everyone's path is different, so take this as just my story, not a rulebook.

But first: was it worth it? For me, 1,000% yes. I am so in love with my daughter. It's really hard to parent solo, and the first 6-8 months especially was very hard for me. But I can't imagine not having done this, and I'm so, so happy. My life would have been wonderful without kids too, and I never want anyone who chooses not to have them to feel bad. But for me, the joy and the love are incredible. It has been so worth it.

If you read nothing else

My biggest piece of advice: Time your pregnancy with friends who live close by and are also having kids. This changed my whole experience (for the better).

Phase 1: I'm just starting to think about it

My story

I was 44. I had just ended a relationship, and I realized 16 (yes, 16!!) of my friends were having babies in the coming year, most of them in my neighborhood. I thought: if there was ever a time to do this on my own, it's right now, while all my friends are doing it too.

I'd always been ambivalent about having kids. But I had frozen my eggs when I was 38, just in case, so I had them, and decided this was a good time to give it a try. If it worked, great. If it didn't, it didn't. But I was ready for a wild adventure, and it felt exciting to explore.

My first step was talking to friends of friends who are single moms. They had kids at different ages, like a 2-year-old and a teenager, so I got a sense of what each stage could look like. That was helpful.

I also told my parents I was thinking about it. They said they'd support me as much as they could, emotionally and financially. Knowing I had their support made a big difference in my decision.

What you can do

- **Join the SMC message board**. It's a great place for very specific questions.
- **Interview people who've done this.** Ask friends to connect you with friends of friends. People are often really generous with their time. Try to talk to moms with kids at different ages, like a toddler and a teenager.
- **Talk to friends and family** to get a sense of how much support you'll have. Family support isn't an option for everyone, but check in with the people closest to you and see if they'd be excited to be part of this. One friend of mine lost her parents, but her brother lives nearby and was thrilled to be involved with her and the baby. Another friend's aunt flew out to be with her during the pregnancy. Knowing what support you'll have can help you feel more confident in your decision.

Phase 2: I'm doing it! How do I choose a donor?

This is a big one. For me, there were three choices to make:

1. **Known donor or bank donor?** A known donor is someone you know (or a friend of a friend). A bank donor comes from a sperm bank.

2. **If you use a bank: Open ID or closed?** Open ID donors agree that your child can contact them later. With closed donors, the child can reach out through the bank when he/she turns 18, and the donor can decide if he wants to connect.
3. **If you use a bank: Adult photo or not?** Some banks and donors share adult photos, and some don't.

If you have strong feelings about any of these, take a minute to figure out why. That'll help you make the decision.

My story

At first I really wanted a known donor. I put the call out to friends to ask their friends, and I actually found a couple of men who were willing. Neither ended up being a good fit. One realized he wanted more involvement in the child's life than I could commit to. The other wasn't very responsive, and I was in a rush, so it just didn't work.

I wanted to involve the people I'm close to, especially friends who were already parents. I planned a "donor brunch" where I'd split friends into groups, give each group links to different sperm banks, and have them pitch donors to everyone so we could vote. I never actually threw it, because the known donors came along first, but I still love the idea.

If you want to steal the brunch idea, here's what I planned: bagels and mimosas, a quick intro with a sample profile, 20 minutes of solo searching, 20 minutes in small groups (each group starts with a different sperm bank), then each group shares its finalists. I gave everyone my criteria up front:

- **Must-haves:** some sign of intelligence, creativity, and kindness; a photo
- **Nice-to-haves:** blue eyes (my whole family has them), Jewish or Eastern European background, tall-ish

In the end, I picked my donor with a friend over a weekend. We were scrolling through profiles together, and my friend found one that sounded really good.

What I optimized for:

- **Signals of intelligence.**
- **Shared heritage.** I chose a donor who's Ashkenazi Jewish, like me. I felt it would be easier to raise a child with my own genetic culture and history, because I'd know how to fold it into their life. With a different background, I worried I wouldn't be able to do it justice.

Obvious caveat: Everyone has their own process here, and there's no wrong set of priorities.

Most of the solo moms I talked to said they picked their donor and never thought about it again. That wasn't true for me. I've had my own journey with it, so don't be surprised if it stays on your mind.

What you can do

- **Decide on the three big choices above.** If you feel strongly about one, take a minute to figure out why.
- **Talk to people who've used donors.** You probably know more than you think, including straight couples. Same-sex parent families have almost always used donors. Ask about their experience if they're open to sharing.
- **If you're thinking about a known donor, ask the friend you have in mind** and see how it feels.
- **Browse a few banks.** I looked at California Cryobank, Fairfax Cryobank, Pacific Reproductive Services, and Xytex. For known donors, there are matching sites like Known Donor Registry and the Just a Baby app, plus donor Facebook groups.
- **Get your people involved.** Throw a donor brunch (steal my plan above), or scroll profiles with a friend.

Phase 3: I have my donor and I'm doing IVF

My biggest lesson: ask about every option, and ask what each one really involves. I felt like I didn't get the full picture from my doctor.

My story

I was told there were two ways to do my cycle:

- **Medicated cycle:** your cycle is controlled with medication.
- **Natural cycle:** they work with your body's own cycle.

I was told the medicated cycle was more predictable and might be slightly better for me because of my history of endometriosis. What I *wasn't* told:

	Medicated cycle	Natural cycle
Cost	Thousands of dollars more, mostly medication	Much less
Shots	About 10 weeks of 6 a.m. shots, which are hard to give to yourself	None of those (vaginal suppositories instead)

The medicated cycle did not work for -- my lining wasn't thick enough for a transfer, and the hormones really impacted my mental health. I had to take a whole month off just to let my system reset. Then I did a natural cycle and it worked the first time!

What you can do

- **Ask about every option, and what each one really involves** for your body, your schedule, and your wallet. That includes natural cycles, not just medicated ones.
- **Be proactive.** Doctors know a lot, but they don't know everything, especially about your body and hormones might impact it. Ask the annoying questions and get second opinions.
- **If you have endometriosis or fibroids, ask about it,** since a lot of doctors see it often.

Phase 4: I'm pregnant!

My story

I had a lot of physical stuff happen during my pregnancy that was really not fun (gestational diabetes, hypertension, acute pain, numbness). You just don't know how your pregnancy is going to go, so give yourself room to take it as it comes and save the planning for later.

One thing that saved me in that last month: swimming. I was incredibly, impossibly large, and the pool was the only place I felt somewhat okay.

Another thing that helped: friends watched my cats for my last month of pregnancy and my first month postpartum. It took a lot of logistics off my plate and made everything simpler.

What helped me most was *not* thinking about all the detailed stuff (what to buy, how to set things up, the spreadsheets) until the third trimester.

What you can do

- **Save the detailed planning for the third trimester.** What to buy, how to set things up, the spreadsheets: it can all wait.
- **Give yourself room to take your pregnancy as it comes.** You don't know how it will go.
- **Find what makes your body feel okay.** For me, it was swimming.
- **Do the admin in the third trimester.** A lot is easy to forget once the baby arrives, like adding the baby to your insurance within 30 days. My real after-birth checklist is in the template linked under Budgeting.
- **Set up mental health support before the baby comes** (more below).
- **Make a will and name a guardian.** It's a hard one, so it gets its own section below.
- **Find a home for your pets around the birth.** Ask friends to take them for your last month of pregnancy and first month postpartum. One less thing to manage.

Taking care of your mental health

Hormones are real, and they can be really hard.

My story

I was working with a perinatal psychiatrist and a therapist before and during my pregnancy, because I knew I was prone to anxiety. Even so, it took me longer than it should have to realize I had severe postpartum anxiety and depression. Once I did, I already had a psychiatrist I'd had a session with, so I could start working with her right away. I started Zoloft about 5 months postpartum, and it changed everything. It was night and day.

What's interesting is that even though I had gotten the therapists, I hadn't even thought about medication until a solo mom friend mentioned her SSRIs. That opened the door for me to consider it too.

What you can do

- **Line up a perinatal psychiatrist and / or a therapist before the baby comes,** so you already have someone if you need them.
- **Know that postpartum anxiety and depression can be hard to see from the inside.** It took me a while to realize what was happening.

- **Be open to medication.** Talk to your doctor about all your options. For me, it made all the difference.
- **Talk about it with other moms.** One friend mentioning her SSRIs is what opened the door for me.

A hard one: a will and a guardian

Nobody wants to think about this, but as a solo parent it matters even more. There's no other parent to step in by default, so if something happens to you, you want to be the one who decided what happens to your kid. It may feel morbid, but it's an act of love for the people you'd leave behind, and for your kid.

- **Name a guardian, and a backup.** Talk to them first, so it's a real yes and not a surprise.
- **Make a will.** That's where you officially name the guardian.
- **Think about money for your kid.** Life insurance can replace your income, and a trust lets someone you choose manage that money until your kid is grown.
- **Update your beneficiaries** on retirement accounts and life insurance, since those don't always follow your will.
- **Add a healthcare directive and a power of attorney**, so someone you trust can make decisions if you can't.
- **Write a letter to your guardian.** Routines, values, the people in your kid's life, the stuff no legal document covers.

Do it before the baby comes, while you still have the headspace. The third trimester admin push is a great time.

Budgeting

I'm a spreadsheet maker. It's my love language. I've been making budgets since college and find them kind of fun (clearly a nerd). So of course I built a whole budget for this. Feel free to use mine.

Here's what my fertility costs actually were in 2022, in the Bay Area. This is with frozen eggs I already had, so it *doesn't* include egg freezing.

What	Cost
Doctors, labs, and procedures	$27,409

What	Cost
Acupuncture	$3,300
Sperm and storage	$2,789
Pharmacy	$2,492
Genetic testing	$1,950
Total	**$37,940**

Here are some of my real first-year costs (2023 to 2024, in Oakland). The big-ticket items are night help and childcare:

Big-ticket item	Cost
Night nurse (first 6 to 8 weeks)	About $2,700 a week at 5 nights (more in "Figuring out what support you'll need" below)
Nanny share (Oct 2023 to Jun 2024)	$36,500

Then there's everything else.

Everyday item	Cost
Lactation consultant	$1,250
Diapers and wipes	About $1,300
Bottles, pumping, formula, and first foods	About $1,850
Baby gear I bought (stroller, changing table, setting up)	About $1,200

Budget template (the link makes your own copy). It has three tabs: a budget split into fertility, baby prep, and the first year, with my numbers as an example and a night nurse calculator, a help sign-up sheet you can share with friends, and my after-birth admin checklist.

Get stuff secondhand

This was key for me. I rarely had to buy clothes because I got so many hand-me-downs.

- **Get into a hand-me-down chain.** Find a friend who's always passing things along to you, then pass them on to the next friend when you're done.
- **Join your neighborhood groups and Buy Nothing groups.**
- **Use Facebook Marketplace for the big-ticket items**, like strollers, cribs, and furniture.
- **Ask your parent friends for everything.** The secret is that parents actually love to give stuff away, because they want it out of their house. Say "I need stuff, just drop it all off and I'll go through it." You're doing them a favor, so don't be shy about asking.

Figuring out what support you'll need

If you can swing it, prioritize a night nurse for the first 6 to 8 weeks. It was so, so helpful for me. It's very expensive, so it's worth planning for in your budget early.

What it cost me in 2023: I got quotes of $55 an hour for 10-hour nights from an agency (Bay City Doulas) and $65 an hour for 8-hour nights (10 pm to 6 am) from an independent night doula. I did 5 nights a week for the first few weeks, then 3 to 4 nights a week. At 5 nights of 9 hours at $60, that's about $2,700 a week. Book early, because good people fill up.

Childcare after that. I did a nanny share with families who had babies around the same age, which also gave me a built-in village. My 2023 Oakland quotes were $25 to $28 an hour for a solo nanny and $30 to $38 an hour for a share. Daycares I looked at ran $705 to $1,690 a month. My nanny charged $30 an hour for one baby and $40 an hour for two, so each family in the share paid $20 an hour. For me, that came to about $3,600 a month.

Think about what your family can (and can't) do. My parents and sisters were a huge part of my support after the birth. That's not everyone's situation, so if family isn't in the picture, plan to lean more on paid help and friends.

When I was figuring out the budget for nanny shares and childcare, I asked a bunch of single moms for advice. Most of them had family nearby they could rely on. That's not the case for me, since my parents are in Philadelphia. A lot of people make this decision around nearby family, and that can be really helpful. But plenty of people don't have that. Just know that without family nearby to help with childcare, it gets challenging to figure out, both financially and logistically.

Build a village of parents with kids the same age. This mattered more to me than almost anything.

How to ask your community to show up for you

Your village wants to show up for you! Make it easy for them by being specific.

- **Make a task sign-up sheet.** I made a spreadsheet of things I needed done and had friends sign up: putting together the nursing chair, breaking down boxes, help around the house. When I was really pregnant, I couldn't do much of anything, so this was huge.
- **Line up a hospital buddy, plus a backup.** For the last weeks of pregnancy, I had a friend, and a backup friend, ready to come to the hospital with me if I needed them.
- **Know when you'll need friends most.** For me, most of the asks were *before* the baby came. Once the baby was born, I had a night nurse and my family (my parents and my sisters), so I didn't need friends as much then.

Why the backup matters: my birth got moved up two weeks to the same day as a routine appointment. My main person couldn't fly in in time, and my backup was sick. I felt scared and alone. But my village came through! One friend changed all her plans and rushed over to be with me in the birthing room, and another packed my hospital bag while I walked him through my house on a video call.

My actual sign-up sheet is the "Help sign-up" tab in the budget template. Copy it and swap in your own tasks.

Parenting style

Not having a co-parent makes parenting both way harder and way easier. You make every decision on your own, which can feel heavy. But on the plus side, there's no negotiating, no judgment, and you get to raise your kid the way you believe in.

It helped me a lot to read about a few parenting philosophies, so I had a framework to lean on when I was deciding alone. The two that resonated most with me:

- **RIE** (Resources for Infant Educarers). Started by Magda Gerber, it treats babies as whole people who can learn without being taught. Good places to start are Gerber's *Your Self-Confident Baby* and Janet Lansbury's *Elevating Child Care* and *No Bad Kids*.
- ***Hunt, Gather, Parent*** by Michaeleen Doucleff. An NPR reporter learns from Maya, Inuit, and Hadza families how they raise calm, helpful kids. I love this book.

My favorite recommendations

A lot of people say to me, "You're a solo mom and you seem to be doing really well and happy. How?" Or, "What advice can you give my friend who's thinking of doing this?" Here are my favorite three tips.

These three things have changed my life for the better. They're little behavioral science hacks: once something is on the calendar or already paid for, you actually show up.

- **Standing aunties.** Two of my friends who don't have kids are aunties to my daughter. We have a standing monthly calendar invite where they sleep over. Because it's already on the calendar, it actually happens, and it's given them a really special relationship with her.
- **A community with shared childcare.** We were part of the Radish, a community where we shared some childcare every weekend, had a shared space, and had so many other kids around.
- **Pre-booking nannies.** I budget a set amount for childcare every month, say $500, so it's just part of the plan and already accounted for. Then I book a nanny on a regular night, like every Wednesday, even if I don't have plans yet. When the time comes and I still don't have plans, I go out by myself anyway and get a little break. It makes sure I take time away from being a mom to reconnect with myself or my community.

More questions people ask me

What was the biggest surprise becoming a parent?

This is hard to answer, because your entire life / identity / physical body changes, and no matter how much you try to prepare, you actually can't know how it will feel until it happens. So everything is a surprise. But one thing I did not expect is how much I wanted my parents to be involved! I really didn't see that coming.

This is so different for everyone. Some people's families aren't in the picture, or aren't helpful. I happen to have parents who are extremely helpful, want to help, and whose company I actually enjoy, so I know I'm lucky. But there's something really special about having other people who love this child as much as you do, and getting to share all of it with them.

What helped you most?

Having other people going through the same thing at the same time. I was the only solo mom among my close friends, but having about 10 other moms with kids around the same age was critical. I never felt alone.

So if you can:

- **Time it with friends who are having kids**, whether they're single moms or not.
- **Live close to them.** Walking distance or a couple of minutes' drive is ideal. Especially in that first year, it's so great to have a little more of a village around your kid.

What's the hardest thing about being a single mom?

People ask this a lot, and it's kind of a weird question. The answer is everything. It's just a lot of things, all at once.

What challenges didn't you expect?

A lot of them were social.

People feel entitled to ask really personal questions. Most people have never known someone who had a kid on their own, so they're curious. Even strangers would say, "I hope you don't mind if I ask, but how did you do it? Who's the donor?" The second you hear "I hope you don't mind if I ask..." you know what's coming. This bothered me a lot when I was pregnant. It felt intrusive, and it was awkward to say "that's none of your business." Would this person ask a gay couple who their donor was? Probably not. They'd never ask a straight couple about their conception either. Even men on first dates have asked me. I don't ask them why they and their wife decided to have a child. It's the same reason I did: I wanted a child.

How other people talk about it. Some people will call the donor "the dad," even if that's not how you think about him. Others just say funny things, like "You're pregnant by yourself? Is that on purpose?"

Talking about it with your child. As your kid grows up, they'll notice their family is a little different. They don't have two parents. I've talked about it with my daughter from the very beginning. I also make sure she's in schools and places where she's not the only family that isn't a mom and a dad, so she sees all kinds of families.

Friends who are "solo parenting" for a weekend. Lots of my mom and dad friends reach out for extra support when their partner is away for a couple of days. Someone once posted, "I'm solo parenting this weekend, anyone want to hang out?" I wanted to reply,

"I'm solo parenting for the next 939 weekends. Anyone want to hang out?" (That's how many weekends there are from birth to 18. I did the math.) People also say "Oh, I understand what it's like" when their spouse was away for a week. But it's not the same. Doing it on your own week after week, with no end date, compounds in a way one week never does.

Even other single parents don't always get it. A lot of divorced parents consider themselves single parents, and when their kids are with them, they are. They understand a lot of it. But being a single parent with three days off a week is very different from never having a day off.

People don't always realize your whole situation. Every time you go out, you need a sitter, which can add $100 to your night. Friends with a partner just leave their kid at home with their spouse with no extra cost. It can be frustrating when people don't think about that.

You chose this. On top of all of it, it was your decision. So it can feel like you can't really expect empathy, because you chose this. There can be a lot of complicated feelings here.

You're not alone

There are so many of us, and I don't think people realize how common this is now. Single Mothers by Choice says over 40,000 women have been members since 1981, and the Reddit community gets over 20,000 visitors a week (Stacker).

I also know this path is a lot easier with money, a flexible job, and family close by. Plenty of women raise kids on their own without choosing it, and they deserve just as much support. I'm sharing these because when I started, I had no idea any of this existed.

Groups, podcasts, and trips made just for us are popping up everywhere now. Here are some links.

Resources

My budget and templates

They're all tabs in one Google Sheet: Budget template (the link makes your own copy). My real numbers are in Budgeting above.

Tab	What it's for
Budget	Fertility, baby prep, and the first year, with my numbers as an example and a night nurse calculator
Help sign-up	A task sheet you can share with friends so they can sign up to help
After-birth admin checklist	The admin that's easy to forget once the baby arrives, like adding the baby to your insurance within 30 days

Community

What	What it is	Where
Local WhatsApp groups	Search for solo mom WhatsApp groups where you live. These have been amazing for me. I'm in a few in the Bay Area, including one for solo moms with kids born in 2023, the same year as my daughter. About 35 women are in it, and they've built a beautiful community with lots of get-togethers.	Your area
Single Mothers by Choice	The original nonprofit, started in 1981. Member message boards plus local chapters for thinkers, tryers, and moms, about $55 a year. The message board helped me most at the beginning and when I had very specific questions, like choosing a donor or postpartum issues specific to single parents.	US and beyond

What	What it is	Where
r/SingleMothersByChoice*	Free, very active community. Good for "has anyone else…" questions at 2 am.	Online
Facebook groups	Big groups with thousands of members. They weren't as useful for me personally, but they could be for you, and it's amazing to see how many women are doing this.	Online
Support Group for Bay Area Solo Mamas (Dr. Madeleine Katz, PsyD)*	Small 10-week group for moms by choice, led by a psychologist. New groups start twice a year, evenings 7 to 8:30 pm.	Berkeley

Podcasts and books

- RIE (Resources for Infant Educarers). The parenting philosophy that resonated most with me. Start with Magda Gerber's *Your Self-Confident Baby* or Janet Lansbury's *Elevating Child Care*.
- *Hunt, Gather, Parent* by Michaeleen Doucleff. I love this book.

There are so many podcasts and books by solo moms now. I haven't listened to most of them, so I'm not going to pretend to recommend one. Search "single mother by choice podcast" and see which voice resonates with you.

Trips

Trip	What it is	Where
SoMos Retreats*	Week-long family retreats started by a solo mom by choice. Nannies 9 to 5 plus two babysitting nights, so you actually get a vacation. About $2,950.	Oaxaca, Mexico

*I don't have personal experience with these, but have heard good things from others.

If this helped, pass it on, and tell me. I'd love to know who's reading it, what helped, and what I should add.

Good luck with your journey!

Deena