

Britain's most messed-up family: When Mark donated sperm to Mandy he claims he never promised to be Daddy - but now the couple are in a bitter legal battle over child support

- **Mark Langridge twice donated his sperm to Mandy Baker and claims he did not intend to take on a parental role**
- **But he has now found himself with a bill from the Child Support Agency**
- **He says the £26 a week he is now expected to pay for 12-year-old Shannon Baker and her sister Rianna, 13, is an outrage**
- **'It was purely a donation. I had no desire, then or now, to be a father,' said Mr Langridge**

By Barbara Davies

When 12-year-old Shannon Baker is older, she wants to look her biological father in the eye and ask him: 'Am I just a sperm donation or am I your daughter?'

It is a disturbing question and one which over the past week has been endlessly discussed, not just by Shannon and her 13-year-old sister Rianna, but by their gay father, Mark Langridge.

Having twice donated his sperm to their lesbian mother, Mandy Baker, without, he says, intending to take on a parental role, he has suddenly found himself with a bill from the Child Support Agency.



Confusing: Mark Langridge twice donated his sperm to Mandy Baker, centre, without, he says, intending to take on a parental role. Ms Baker is pictured with daughters Shannon 12, left, and Rianna 14, right

This week, in the hope of winning public support, the 47-year-old spoke out about his situation — even appearing on ITV1's This Morning programme to complain of his plight.

He says the £26 a week he is now expected to pay for the girls is an outrage. His name is not on either of their birth certificates and he insists he played no part in their upbringing following his 'act of kindness'. He is, he says, a sperm donor, not a father.

'It was purely a donation,' he says. 'I had no desire, then or now, to be a father. Mandy wanted children and I supplied the ingredient. The biggest regret of my life is getting involved with this.'

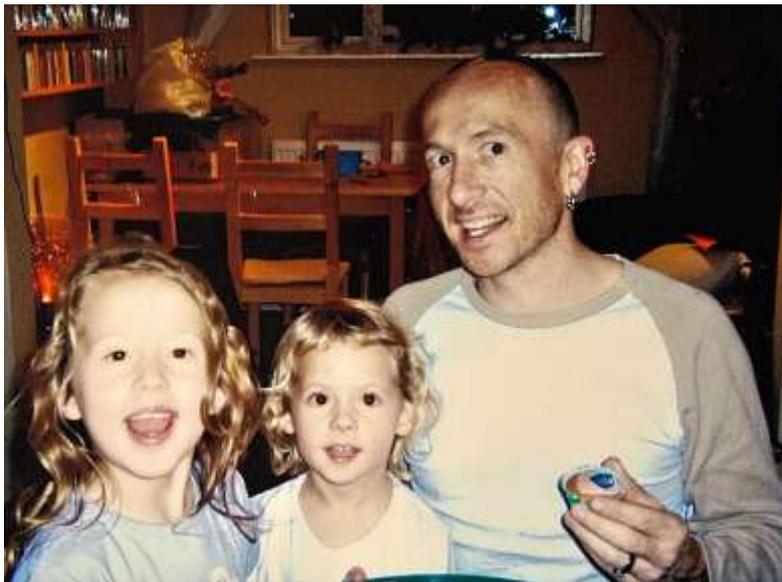
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Meanwhile, the girls' 49-year-old mother Mandy claims that she and Mark had always intended to co-parent the girls, and raise them as one big, happy — if unconventional — family, and that she only reported Mark to the CSA out of desperation.

She argues that Rianna and Shannon once called him 'Daddy' and has photographs of Mark cradling the girls, along with video footage of them together at birthday and Christmas parties at their three-bedroom home near Braintree, Essex.

Both parties spoke to the Mail this week to give their sides of this sorry affair. While both talk of betrayal, their row throws the spotlight on a loophole in UK family law. Only anonymous donors, at licensed clinics, are exempt from being treated as the legal father of a child born as a result of their sperm donation.



Not happy: Mr Langridge says the £26 a week he is now expected to pay for the girls is an outrage. He is pictured with Rianna and Shannon

Men like Mark, who donate sperm as part of a personal arrangement, have no such legal protection unless they donate to couples who are married or in a civil partnership.

But the legal niceties of Mark and Mandy's arrangement are meaningless to the two confused teenage girls caught up in this lamentable saga.

'I get upset about my dad,' says Shannon. Rianna adds: 'I've lost all respect for him.'

Their story began, somewhat prosaically, in an Essex nightclub called 'Bliss' in 1997 where their mother, then a 34-year-old former landscape gardener, was helping out on the door.

Mark Langridge, a part-time book-keeper from Basildon, was a regular visitor with his partner, florist Shaun. Over the months, Mark and Mandy became friends. Eventually, their conversations turned to parenthood.

'I was desperate to have my own family,' says Mandy, who adds she was not in a relationship and, despite having realised she was gay as a teenager, was not open about her sexuality.

'I regarded it as a private matter,' she says. 'I'm not a conventional lesbian. I don't believe in two women calling themselves Mum. I think there's one mum and one dad.'

'I was desperate to have a family, but in the late 90s, it was impossible for single women to get treatment from fertility clinics.'

'Mark was a nice bloke, and every time he and Shaun came down, we got back to the same topic of conversation. In the end, it was Mark's idea. He offered to help me.'

On this part of the story, both parties agree. 'Mandy wanted a baby,' recalls Mark. 'I talked it over with Shaun and I couldn't see a reason not to help her. It was completely altruistic. I was helping her dream come true.'



Looking for support: Mr Langridge this week appeared on ITV1's This Morning programme to complain of his plight. It is hosted by Holly Willoughby and Phillip Schofield, pictured

At this point, however, their recollection of the facts starts to divide. 'The understanding was that there would be no financial or parental obligation on my part,' insists Mark.

Mandy, meanwhile, remembers differently: 'He and Shaun had a good, stable set-up,' she says.

'I wanted to be sure he would be there supporting the babies financially, physically, mentally. I didn't want them living off benefits. I wanted them to have a father and a mother.'

Whatever the truth may be, it seems certain that neither she nor Mark put much thought into their momentous decision or considered that such a flimsy arrangement might be a poor basis for years of co-parenting. Nevertheless, in January 1998, armed with a book called 'Challenging Conceptions — planning a family by self-insemination' and an empty pill container, Mandy paid Mark a visit.

'She gave me the container and I went into one room, while she stayed in another. Afterwards, I gave it back and she did what she had to do,' he says. 'I thought of it as just like giving blood.'

Within weeks, a test revealed that Mandy was pregnant. She says both she and Mark were 'over the moon', while Mark speaks only of his 'relief' that 'it had happened quickly and I didn't have to go through it again'.

Rianna was born on November 10, 1998 and Mark visited Mandy and the baby around a week later. Curiously, he describes his feelings towards his biological daughter as 'recognition'.

'I probably felt a bit more towards her than I would have for a friend's baby,' he says, before insisting he and Shaun only visited 'as friends of Mandy'.

A couple of weeks later, with Rianna in her arms, Mandy was a guest at Mark and Shaun's partnership ceremony, at the Sea Life Centre in Southend-on-Sea, where Mark's parents began asking questions about the baby girl who looked so like their son.

Mandy says they were delighted when, a few days later, Mark told them Rianna was his daughter.

Yet, according to Mark, the 'doting' grandparents weren't as enthusiastic as Mandy maintains.

'They thought I was mad. I think they realised early on that everything was going to be controlled by Mandy. 'If she wanted them to have a relationship with the baby, they would have, and if she didn't, they wouldn't.' But relationships did develop. Mark and Shaun visited fortnightly. Mark's father and stepmother visited weekly. His mother was also a frequent visitor.

At the time, Mandy was struggling on benefits. She was contacted by the CSA to ask why her daughter's father wasn't contributing and lied that he was an American who had left the country. 'The last thing on my mind was money,' she says. 'I didn't want to be nasty because I wanted Mark to be around to see his daughter.'



Donor: Mark Langridge is pictured holding a file of letters relating to his case

When Rianna was five months old, Mark agreed to donate sperm again. Mandy conceived for a second time and Shannon was born on March 31, 2000.

Once again Mark, Shaun and his family visited on several occasions.

Looking through Mandy's photos and videos of those early days, it is clear she was working hard to create — or create the impression of — one big happy family.

During a trip to Colchester Zoo, Mark and Shaun can be seen with Rianna, along with Mark's father and stepmother — 'Nanny and Granddad' — and Mandy. Other clips show family barbecues and birthday parties.

It is clear from the images the girls were never short of gifts from the adults around them. But amid the copious amounts of toys — mermaid dolls and colouring books and video games — overshadowing it all is the spectre of a fractured family set-up where expectations were never defined.

Inevitably, Mandy blames the confusion on Mark. 'It was cruel of him to get them involved with his family if he thought he was just a sperm donor,' she says.

Mark, meanwhile, insists Mandy manipulated his family. 'She drew them in while they were useful to her,' he says bitterly. 'She was gathering evidence, building up a picture.'

Whatever Mandy's motives, a relationship did indeed build up between the girls and their extended family, with trips out ice-skating, swimming and to pantomimes. Mark's mother even opened a bank account for the girls.

And it is difficult to accept Mark's argument that he never intended to play any part in their lives when he openly admits he and Shaun often took them out. 'This was at Mandy's instigation,' he argues. 'We had to. She was very manipulative. I was trying to keep the peace.'

When the girls began to refer to him as their father, Mark says he wasn't consulted. 'When Mandy decided I was "Daddy", the girls started calling me Daddy,' he explains. 'I didn't find myself able to turn round and say: "Hang on". It was a fait accompli.'

Confusing the already complicated tit-for-tat further is Mark's insistence that Mandy had a live-in partner who, he claims, supported her financially.

'She split up with her other half and then wanted money from me,' he says.

'She's the one the CSA should be pursuing. She's the non-resident parent, not me.'

Mandy emphatically denies this. The woman, she says, is an ex-girlfriend who was living in her house while she was recovering from cancer. 'We were not a couple. She was just a friend,' she says. 'I was on benefits, but that woman was absolutely amazing. She did the job he should have done. She saw that I was struggling and helped out as a friend.'

A muddle indeed.

By 2004, relations between Mandy and Mark were nearing complete breakdown. Letters exchanged at that time reveal how dangerously blurred their roles had become.

In one, Mandy writes: 'I have just one question: what have you done as a father for these girls in five years?'

Mark responded to her: 'Obviously it appears I've got to be around more for them. I do want to be part of their lives and so all I can say is I will make more effort to get together with them.'

'In the past we've offered to babysit. We have also asked to take them out now and again, it's just a shame that it's only happened the once, and then only for a couple of hours.'

'It was your idea for us to only take them out for a little while on that occasion, but it should have led on to more and longer times so I could build a better relationship with them. Let's hope in the future that's what happens. The last thing I want to do is hurt them. I want them to enjoy life and to appreciate what a dynamic and large family they have around them.'

Mark believes the letter does not contradict his assertion that it was Mandy who wanted children and that the agreement he had with her was that he would see the girls 'now and then', popping round on their birthday or the occasional family party as 'part of the crowd'.

Whatever the arrangement was, for the last eight years he has played no part in their lives.

In the end, says Mark, he cut off contact. 'Mandy was blurring the lines, getting the girls to call me Daddy and threatening me with the CSA,' he says.

'Shaun and I took the decision enough was enough.'

The last time Mark saw Rianna and Shannon was in 2004 when they were three and four. They have since also lost touch with Mark's parents.

Asked if he would consider seeing the girls again, Mark says: 'It's unlikely to happen. It's awful. I don't wish the girls any ill. But they're not in my life. My mistake has been trying to do the right thing. It is ridiculous that this is allowed to happen. I am the injured party.'

Whatever the rights and wrongs of this domestic tragedy, it's difficult to feel pity for anyone more than the two young girls at the heart of it.

Sitting on the sofa at home, playing with the white kitten their mother recently bought them, their smiles fade when they speak of their father.

'I don't think he'd recognise us now,' says Shannon.

They talk of friends with divorced parents who visit their fathers at weekends. They can't understand why it isn't the same for them.

'My friend's parents split up and her dad still came to see her,' says Rianna. 'He still paid for her school trips. Our dad didn't do that.'

Both have written to Mark, to ask him why he stopped seeing them and if he still loves them. Rightly or wrongly, it is clear their view of him goes beyond that of a sperm donor.

Mark says he writes back and tells them to ask their mother for the truth. 'I haven't felt able to tell them,' he says.

Mandy admits that she only told her daughters she was gay three years ago. Clearly, there are only versions of 'truth' in this catastrophic family set-up.

The girls have had counselling at school as they struggle to come to terms with the circumstances of their birth.

'I thought Mum and Dad were married and had kids the normal way,' says Rianna, who says she never wants to marry or have children. 'It was a bit of a shock.'

Bizarrely, Mandy insists it was the girls who persuaded her to contact the CSA in June this year after asking her why she wasn't pursuing their father for maintenance.

Mark, who says he is on a low income, is appealing against the order, but has already been threatened with court action if he does not pay the requested £26 a week.

As this bitter war of words heads for the courts, Mandy insists she has no regrets. 'I still think it could have worked,' she says. 'If Mark had played his part, we could have ended up a fantastic family.'

Somehow, considering the rocky foundations upon which she introduced her daughters to the world, it is hard to believe that is true.