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Finding A Parenting Partner: A Q&A With FamilyByDesign Founder, Darren Spedale

By Nicole Rodgers

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Role/Reboot's Editor-in-Chief, Nicole Rodgers, spoke with Darren Spedale, founder of [FamilyByDesign](#), an online community that pairs parenting partners.

Nicole: Give us the elevator pitch: What is FamilyByDesign?

Darren: FamilyByDesign is a community for parenting partnerships. We help people find their ideal parenting partner, and we're the only community to bring together leading authorities and experts on the modern family in one place to provide information and guidance on parenting partnerships for our members.

Your bio says you have personal experience with this because you went through your own search for the right parenting partner. Can you tell me a little more about how the search started, and where you are with that now?

On the professional side, I've always been fascinated by the exponential growth in non-traditional family



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structures over the last generation, and so I've been researching and writing about modern family trends since I was in college. I spent two years in northern Europe on a Fulbright Fellowship researching how governments there are recognizing non-traditional families, which led to my first book about modern families which was based on a subset of that research.

When it comes to parenting partnerships, the professional met the personal. I always thought at this point in my life (I'm 38 now), I'd be settled down with my life partner, 2.2 kids and the house with the white picket fence. However, when I hit 36 and found myself single, I began to think about what my alternatives would be to become a parent. I wanted to be more than just a good uncle, but I couldn't see myself becoming a single parent. The scheduling, financial, and emotional pressures on one person raising a child alone just struck me as too difficult.

I was set up on a couple of co-parenting "dates" by some friends of mine who had single female friends who wanted to become parents, but not as single parents themselves. It was funny how much those first meetings were like regular dates—we met at a bar, had a drink, and started a conversation. They were wonderful women, but the personal chemistry between us wasn't quite right—so I thought to myself, "I have to read the book on how these parenting partnerships are done!" And then, discovering there was no such book, I decided to write it myself, in conjunction with creating FamilyByDesign.com.

I'm still working toward finding my right parenting partner. I recognize what an enormous commitment parenting is and how important it is to find a partner with whom you have strong chemistry—so I want to take my time and be thoughtful about the process.

I know the site is new and still in beta. How many people looking for parenting partners have populated the site so far? Can you tell me a little about the people using it, in terms of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, etc.? And what's the most common scenario, if there is such a thing?

Since our "soft launch" last summer until our official launch at the beginning of this year, the number of site users has grown into the thousands. There's a relatively balanced mix of men and women, straight and gay—mostly singles but also some couples looking for a parenting partner (for example, female couples seeking a known sperm donor to play a father-figure role in their child's life).

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Let's talk about stigma for a moment: How much is the stigma of not finding a romantic partner to have children with holding would-be parents back? In other words, do you think folks are reluctant to use a site like FamilyByDesign because they feel it represents some sort of personal failure? If so, how do we combat that stigma?

There's no doubt that many people see parenting partnerships as a "Plan B"—meaning that their "Plan A" of finding the right romantic partner to have kids with has failed. We're sensitive to that, and so part of FamilyByDesign's task is to make people feel good about starting on their "Plan B," if that's the case.

On the other hand, I've spoken with a number of people who are quite encouraged by the idea that they can find a scheduling, financial, and emotional partner on their parenting journey, even as a single adult. So if single parenting was their original "Plan B," parenting partnerships may now become their "Plan A-minus." And for a smaller number of adults who never envisioned themselves in a traditional romantic relationship, parenting partnerships actually are a "Plan A."

But I don't think this stigma will be there for much longer. Generation Y, even more so than Generation X, is very comfortable with the concept that parenting and marriage are separate issues to consider. There's a very interesting recent study by the nonpartisan Pew Foundation titled "[For Millennials, Parenthood Trumps Marriage](#)," which finds that, while 52% of Millennials believe that parenthood is one of the most important things in life, only 30% say the same thing about a successful marriage.

This decoupling of parenting and marriage in the minds of Millennials, along with Generation Y's "sharing economy" mindset, leads me to believe that parenting partnerships will increasingly be seen as a viable—and welcome—alternative in the years to come.

Have you seen instances where platonic co-parents become intimate partners over time? Do you expect to see that, or (spoiler alert) did I just get carried away in the *Friends With Kids* Hollywood ending?

It does happen. And in fact, FamilyByDesign contemplates this possibility by allowing people to indicate in their profiles if they're ideally looking for a romantic relationship with their parenting partner. Elective co-parenting does not require a platonic relationship.

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In fact, one thing that people should understand is that parenting partnerships can take different forms—there's no cookie-cutter “required” structure for these relationships to thrive. The goal of FamilyByDesign is to bring responsible, thoughtful people together who are at a stage in their life where they're ready to become parents, and they want to begin the conversation around parenting with someone at a similar stage in their lives. Whether that's platonic or romantic—or even biological vs. adoptive—depends on what the parenting partners mutually wish.

Obviously, as you state pretty clearly, finding a parenting partner is a huge choice that impacts the rest of your life and should not be approached lightly. What do you think are the biggest impediments or challenges for people seeking a parenting partner: legal, medical, financial, psychological, or simply choosing a match that feels like a good “fit”?

If there's one most important point I want to share with people, it's that a parenting partnership is *not* about having a child with someone you don't yet know well. If I've learned anything from my interviews with successful parenting partners, it's that a successful partnership requires you to take the time to build a relationship and a personal bond with the other person (or persons) before even thinking about conception. Ideally, this means not only spending a lot of time with each other one-on-one, but eventually getting to know each others' friends, family, and so forth. Some parenting partners have even suggested spending time with your prospective partner around children to see how they interact with kids.

The other challenge people need to be prepared for is flexibility and compromise. Just like any long-term relationship, situations and conditions will change over time in ways the partners can't foresee—so the relationship has to be strong enough, and flexible enough, for the parties to honestly and openly discuss the issues and agree on compromise when these challenges come up. And that's why the previous point of building a relationship first is so important.

On the other hand, I think one of the great benefits of parenting partnerships—when done correctly—are that they foster lots of communication between the prospective partners before they become parents. By taking the time to discuss all the issues around parenting as you get to know each other—and in a co-parenting agreement before conception—you're setting yourself up with a strong foundation for your partnership going forward.

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