

I am Jennifer Armstrong M.Ed- Counselling, I am from Ontario, Canada. I am currently employed as a fertility doula and surrogacy coach. I have previously worked as a Family Therapist for 7 years. I am from Ottawa Canada. I am also a two time gestational surrogate. I previously gave birth to a healthy baby boy in Aug 2021 and he lives with his two dads in Toronto Ontario, Canada. I am also currently newly pregnant with my second surrogate pregnancy for a couple that lives in Chilliwack, BC, Canada. I am speaking to provide you some insight into being a gestational surrogate in Canada.

I always believed that I was always going to be a surrogate for someone. I knew that being a surrogate was a desire that I have had all of my life and expected that I was going to have someone in my life that required help in having their family. However, as the years went on, I didn't come across anyone in my life that required a surrogate. In 2020 I became aware that I qualified to be a surrogate through an agency ad with Canadian Fertility Consulting. After speaking with my partner, I applied the following day.

Following the application process, I was given a selection of intended parents that I was able to match with. Matching with intended parents is an individualized process in which you are sent profiles. The amount of profiles you are sent is dependant on your preferences. Intended Parents are matched on high level matching points such as views on termination, desired relationship, desired fertility clinics, place of birth or any non-negotiable items that either the surrogate or the intended parents may have. Typically, surrogates are sent profiles to review and select any profile that they feel is best suited to proceed with the next phase. You are then introduced to your intended parents and enter a "dating phase" where you take the time both parties feel necessary to get to know each other to decide if this match is right for you. In this time getting to know each other can include e-mails, texts, phone/video calls and meeting in person. Fortunately, given that my first couple lived close enough we were able to coordinate an in person meeting in a park, joined by my partner and my two children.

Over the course of a few weeks we chatted fairly regularly and decided that we were a good fit and we decided to officially match. I was lucky with my first match as I didn't have to meet with any other sets of parents to find our match. Our agency was really great at speaking with me before sending me profiles to get a good sense of what I was looking for in a match.

For my second surrogacy, I originally matched with a single intended mother. Unfortunately, following our first meeting I did not feel as though she would have been a good fit for me. After a couple of weeks, I met with my second set of intended parents. Almost immediately, I knew that the second set of intended parents were going to be a great fit for me and my family and we officially matched quite quickly.

Following officially matching, all parties are required to do medical and psychological screenings. I was required to go through sexually transmitted infectious testing as well as a comprehensive medical screening regarding my suitability for pregnancy completed by the fertility clinic. A surrogate is

usually required to complete bloodtests locally and will usually need to travel to the fertility clinic that the intended parents have chosen to complete their medical screening

During the same time all parties are required to meet with a counsellor to ensure that the match is appropriate and that all parties understand the surrogacy process and requirements as well as ensuring they have suitable mental health profiles for a surrogacy arrangement as well as assessing motivations for surrogacy and to ensure that the surrogate and her partner understand the risks. They also understand that the intended parents are to be recognized as the legal parents under the law.

Following medical clearance the intended parents and surrogate seek independent legal advice and create a mutually beneficial surrogacy contract. The surrogacy contract is quite comprehensive and each lawyer ensures that there are clear guidelines for extraordinary circumstances such as death, divorce, loss of organs, termination and selective reduction, sharing of medical information, termination of agreement, process of conception, post transfer, prenatal and genetic screening, birth plans, custodial rights and birth registration, relationship following birth and clear financial reimbursements.

Following the completion of contracts, the surrogate is now cleared to transfer at the fertility clinic. Transfers of embryos are completed using IVF. Depending on the individual and the clinic protocols the surrogate is required to take a list of prescribed medications prior to embryo transfer. Prior to embryo transfer a surrogate usually must complete a uterine lining check to ensure that the uterine lining is suitable for transfer of an embryo. If the uterine lining is not suitable, usually medications are adjusted until the desired uterine lining is achieved. Once the uterine lining is suitable an embryo transfer is scheduled within about a week depending on the age of the embryo. Then there are typically new medications added to the regimen to support embryo transfer.

Then a surrogate will travel to the fertility clinic for embryo transfer. If all goes well the embryo is transferred successfully and typically 10-14 days later the surrogate has a blood test to determine she is pregnant. If she is not, then all parties decide when it is suitable for another transfer. The amount of attempted transfers is determined by the contract and the fertility clinic. Typically, contracts indicate that a surrogate or intended parent may terminate the contract following the first failed transfer.

If the blood test determines that she is pregnant, then the surrogate is given another blood test to ensure that pregnancy hormones are increasing appropriately. Depending on the fertility clinic protocol, the surrogate is required to obtain a series of ultrasounds throughout the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. The surrogate is required to continue the fertility medication as directed typically for the first 10-12 weeks of pregnancy. Following 10-12 weeks of pregnancy the surrogate “graduates” from the fertility clinic and follows up with the prenatal care team of her choice.

The first transfer worked in both of my surrogacy journeys. The process from matching with my first set of intended parents to birth was approximately 14 months. I continue to maintain contact with the intended parents and we schedule in person visits when we can. The child is currently 10 months old.

As stated earlier I am currently pregnant with another surrogate child.

I was supported in many ways during my surrogacy journey. For the purposes of clarity in this section I will refer to my first surrogacy journey only as I have not yet completed my second journey.

My agency- Canadian Fertility Consulting (CFC) supported me throughout my entire surrogacy journey and postpartum. I was assigned my own surrogacy coordinator who walked me through all of the facets of my journey. I had free access to counselling services for myself and my family from application to 6 months postpartum. There were no limits to the amount of sessions that I could book or attend. I had complete autonomy to choose what care providers were included such as lawyers, clinics, birth providers, and medical staff. At no time, was I forced or coerced into a timeline or schedule that didn't work for me and my family. I was free to make autonomous choices about what tests, requirements, contract obligations that I was willing to submit to. I was completely able to take the time to make informed choices about my care and at no time did I feel as though I was being taken advantage of. It was made clear to me throughout my surrogacy journey that I had complete bodily autonomy and that my personal welfare and well-being were the utmost priority to all the professionals involved in my surrogacy journey.

My desire to pursue surrogacy came from a deep desire to help others create a family of their own. There is something so special about being part of the birth of any child. From the beginning of the the surrogacy process surrogates are well prepared and understand that in no way this child is their own, from a genetic and an attachment perspective. You know and understand from before conception the child that is created will not be your own. With this understanding brings a different connection to the pregnancy itself. While you are still nurturing an unborn child you always know that the child you are carrying is someone else's. There is often a concern in the surrogacy community based on a false belief that surrogates can become too attached to the child they are carrying and have distress giving the child up. The issue with this concern is the understanding that this child only exists because the intended parents are involved and orchestrate the creation of this child. Without the intended parents this child would not exist. Therefore, there is no child to give up rather it is the surrogate who must return the child to their rightful parents. At no time did I ever feel distress regarding handing the child over to the intended parents. I did not and do not feel as though I should have any legal rights to the child I gave birth to. He has always been the child of my intended parents, I was simply his long term babysitter. As a matter of fact, the greatest experience for me is seeing those intended parents raise their son. It is an absolute joy to watch this beautiful family grow and thrive together. I have never experienced greater accomplishment and sense of purpose in any other endeavour in my life than I have with being a surrogate.

Being a part of my surrogacy journey will be one of my favourite things I will ever do as a person. I have never felt more empowered as a woman, mother and partner as I did with being a surrogate. Surrogacy changed me in ways I cannot express fully in words. It brought me closer to my husband, children and myself. I don't believe I would be half the woman I am today if it wasn't for being a surrogate.

