

## Rachel's story

All though my IVF journey I would imagine the children I would have. I have imagined putting them to bed, reading them stories, my husband taking them out on their bikes. We have talked about what we would call them, names for little boys and girls. I have imagined how we would be great parents, how we would be a great little family, going on great little adventures every week, but it was not to be. I have had congenital issues from birth and had undergone some reconstructive gynaecological surgery as a teenager, but I had always been told that there was the possibility that I would be able to have children, but would need to undergo IVF. So I took the doctors at their word and believed that I would have my own children. I am generally a positive person anyway, so throughout the time going through IVF, I stayed positive and continued to imagine my life as a mother, with my little family.

We actually needed intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) treatment, which is another form of IVF and we were put on the NHS waiting list for fertility treatment when I was 29. In Northern Ireland, only one round of IVF is available on the NHS, while in other parts of the UK couples can access up to three rounds. It was at least two years from referral before we actually started having any treatment. In that time we actually got married, went on honeymoon and continued to have a fabulous time, but it was always in the back of my mind, waiting for a letter from the hospital. When planning holidays or events in the future, you would start to imagine that you might be going through treatment then, or might even be pregnant!

Our first round of ICSI, everything went well, the drugs did not affect me too badly, we had a good number of eggs, excellent quality embryos, straightforward transfer, it was all great and I was starting to imagine that we would be one of those couples who get pregnant on their first go. I was convinced, but it was not to be and I was crushed and heartbroken. We had two frozen embryos, so we picked ourselves up and started imagining how it would work next time, but it wasn't to be and neither of our two frozen embryos resulted in pregnancy.

We had decided that if the second frozen embryo did not work, we could not keep going through the rollercoaster of emotions and treatment, constantly putting our lives on hold and building ourselves up, only to be crushed again and again. However, having made the decision to stop; then came the guilt and the questions. Should we have tried one more time, should we just keep trying forever until we do get pregnant? What am I going to do with my life now? If I'm not a mother, what is my meaning in life? I wonder if people are quietly asking themselves: why do they not have children? Do they not want children? Are they too selfish to want children?

There is also the pain of other people's pregnancies and babies and the awkwardness of not knowing how to react, join in conversations or trying to stop the tears running down your face while others unknowingly break your heart over and over again. The other guilt and pressure that I put on myself now, is that I feel that I should be great or amazing at something else; I need to pour my energy into something else. I feel that if I am not raising a family there is an expectation to excel in some other way and the pressure to do that is very difficult. Right now, we're trying to be positive, enjoy the world and the adventures that we would not be able to do if we did have a child.

We do plan to adopt in a few years, but right now, we are just coming to terms with the fact that this part of the journey is over for us.