

Despite all that's happened, Sarah's only regret is that she didn't go through the egg-freezing process sooner



'HOW DO YOU TELL A FIRST DATE YOU'VE GOT YOUR EGGS ON ICE?'

As actress Anna Friel plans to, Sarah Elizabeth Richards froze her eggs at the age of 36 to take away the baby pressure. But she found dating while your eggs are on ice isn't always easy...

WORDS: JANE MULKERRINS
PHOTO: CIRCE PHOTOGRAPHY

'AS I uploaded the photographs of myself on to the internet dating site, I glanced at the box that asked: do you want children? Without a second thought I ticked the box marked "definitely". I knew some people might think I was kidding myself by beginning the hunt for a husband and someone who could give me kids as I approached 40, but the truth is, all the anxiety and panic that had gripped me for much of my early thirties was gone.

'Six years ago I spent £30,000 freezing my eggs, which means that now, despite being 42, I've never felt calmer about motherhood. I've even met the man I want to have children with and – dare I say it? – I am ready to thaw them.

'I've always known I wanted children (two: a boy and a girl) but, like many women of my generation, I spent my late twenties establishing my career. I was also

in an eight-year relationship that wasn't working but that I didn't know how to get out of. All I knew was that it wasn't the sort of relationship I'd bring a child into.

'Eventually, I left him and at 32 found myself single. With my biological clock ticking, there was no time to mess about, and internet dating seemed like a wise move. I signed up to several sites and dated a lot of men over two years, but I never fell in love with any of them.

'Then I met NYC Paul. He was 41 and had kind eyes. His profile said "maybe" to children, but I'd recently been on a string of bad dates, so I thought, why not? Within a few months, I had fallen in love with him. When I eventually summoned up the courage to ask about the C word, he said, "I don't want children right now. But who knows about the future?"

'We were so in love that I genuinely ▶

Sarah Elizabeth
– here with her
nephew – knows
it's 'when' not 'if'
she has children



« THE PANIC THAT GRIPPED ME WAS GONE. DESPITE BEING 42, I'VE NEVER FELT CALMER ABOUT MOTHERHOOD »

believed time would sort this issue. But I also needed a back-up. I'd heard about egg freezing and wondered if it might buy us more time. So, a few months after my 36th birthday, I spoke to my doctor, who agreed it was worth looking into.

'My parents, while not disapproving, found our wranglings hard to understand. Why didn't my boyfriend and I just get married and pregnant, the old-fashioned way? Some of my friends were critical, too, thinking I was foolish for believing Paul would come round to the idea.

'Over eight rounds of egg freezing, I put away 70 eggs – enough, I hoped, for two babies further along the line. My legs and hips were bruised, my hair was thinning and I had put on over half a stone from the hormones. But I carried on, with Paul's support. Deep down, I thought I could relax, having safeguarded my future. If only. Freezing my eggs actually turned out to be a catalyst. Having spent so much time, money and effort, I was forced to face up to just how much I wanted children.

'While I felt a new clarity, I also realised we'd reached an impasse. Paul was worried that our relationship would suffer from parenthood and that we wouldn't be able to live the lifestyle we enjoyed. Eventually his "maybe" became a "no".

'One Sunday evening, I told Paul what I had been avoiding for more than three years – that I needed to go after what I wanted. I had always hoped I'd change Paul's mind and, as we both sobbed, I was racked with terror that I would never find anyone else I loved as much. I grieved for my fantasies of family life with him, but I also knew the only choice I had was to break up

with him. So, with my 40th birthday on the horizon, I found myself in front of the computer once more. I was eight years older than the last time I'd begun this process, but since I had figured out a way to stop the biological clock, I knew I could figure out the dating game too.

'This time around, I was far more picky; I didn't even bother with a second date unless I was interested. My newfound confidence seemed to come through in my appearance and manner too – and despite my fussiness, my dating life was much more successful.

'I went on dozens of dates but didn't bring up the subject of egg freezing to begin with. You try thinking of a way to explain it in a way that says, "There is a lot less pressure, I'm not in a rush, I'm not looking for just some guy to have kids with", without freaking them out.

'Equally, though, it was hard to avoid. I'd written a couple of articles about egg freezing, so I had business cards made that just said Sarah Richards, leaving out the middle Elizabeth, because you can't easily find me on Google that way. I didn't want egg freezing to be the first thing a date thought about me.

'Some men seemed uncomfortable about it, others thought it was a wonderful idea. One said outright he'd love to have kids with me. I was surprised, to say the least. If I did tell someone, I would have to give them a biology lesson. Some men talked with great authority (so they thought) on the subject, but they often got the facts wrong and I couldn't help but correct them.

'I sometimes felt on dates that I had a special secret I couldn't reveal too soon. I felt men might have a preconceived idea

that, because of my age, I wouldn't be able to have kids beyond the next few years or would want them starting next week. I felt they might put me in one of two boxes: baby crazy or too old. I knew I had a huge advantage, having my eggs on ice, but the paradox was that I couldn't tell them that straight away.

'Then, last summer, I met my current boyfriend. He is 46, divorced, with two children, aged 11 and nine. We had an instant connection, and I felt so comfortable that within the first hour of our first date, I told him all about the egg freezing. Perhaps my openness allowed him to reciprocate: he confessed he too wanted more children.

'We've been dating for nine months now, and our rough plan is to have children together in the next year. There are a few steps we have to go through first, and my doctor says we should try the old-fashioned route to start with. But if in a year's time I haven't conceived naturally, I will begin the process of thawing my eggs.

'Of course, I have fears that it might not work. Will the first thaw cycle work? What if I miscarry? I know I am still on a timeline of sorts, and I am happy to try having children until my mid-forties, perhaps 46 for a second child, but after 50, I would feel that would be pushing it.

'And, after all the time and money, I'm aware that it might not work at all. Very few women, even if they have frozen their eggs, have yet got to the stage of thawing them to be fertilised and implanted.

'I would be very disappointed if my eggs are not usable, but in those circumstances, I would try donor eggs. Luckily, my boyfriend is happy to explore all the options to have a child together too.

'If my boyfriend and I were to break up, I can't see myself trying to conceive as a single mother. I think other women are incredibly brave for doing it that way, but it is not what I want. For me, with my eggs safely stored on ice, I feel confident that if this relationship didn't work out, I would find someone else.

'My only regret is that I didn't do it sooner. I spent so many years panicking that I was going to miss out on the things I had always wanted. I often imagine how much more confident I would have been, with myself and in relationships, if I'd taken charge of my own fertility sooner. These days, I no longer worry about *if* I'll have children; it's definitely a case of *when*. ■ *'Motherhood Rescheduled: The New Frontier Of Egg Freezing And The Women Who Tried It' by Sarah Elizabeth Richards (£16.99, amazon.co.uk)*