

What About The Children?

Patrons: Sir Michael Morpurgo, Rebecca Abrams, Sir John Timpson

'Raising awareness of the never-changing emotional needs of children in our ever-changing society'



Dame Sarah Storey: Being Mum

Dame Sarah Storey is the most successful female British Paralympian of all time. She has been world champion in both swimming and track and road cycling and, amazingly, she is also a British gold medal winner in able-bodied cycling events as well. She spoke to the conference today, though, not so much as the superb athlete she is, but as a mother, and how she combines her training and competing with being an on-the-spot mum with her family of two young children, Louisa (6) and Charlie (1 ½)

Sarah told us about starting her family with her parents living nearby, which was a wonderful support. She had an emergency Caesarian with Louisa and said that, like all new parents, she looked up everything she could in order to learn about being a parent. She read a number of books, spoke to professionals, listened to friends and generally did all she could to be well-informed. She found "Babycalm" particularly helpful. She was determined to breastfeed, not only having learned of the advantages, but more to the point her sister had breastfed, her friends all breastfed, her mother had as well, so it appeared to her as, unquestionably, simply the normal thing to do.

Sarah said her first child, Louisa, would be 6 this coming June. She described her excitement after the birth, and how she couldn't take her eyes off her new baby. She was particularly thrilled when she discovered that her brand new tiny baby, only a few hours old, turned her head towards her when she spoke (to her own, visiting, mother). She realised her voice meant something already to her child. She confessed to having been a typical new mum, panicking about everything, still reading all she could but also wondering when she could get back to training safely.

She decided she would let her baby 'tell' her what she needed, and she would take her cues from this. Gradually, as she could manage, she started training, though taking the baby, and importantly her husband, with her! He would carry the baby in a sling and Sarah would only actually start training when the little child was asleep. She expressed milk into a bottle so her milk was always available, but Louisa never touched the bottle, she would wait until her mother had finished her training session so she could always feed at the breast! It was proudly announced that not a day's training was missed until Louisa was 3, when only on the one occasion the little girl was ill so Sarah stayed with her, cuddling her all day.

The baby was a priority and was rarely left at home if Sarah had to go out and meet people: she would take Louisa with her, although would always let people know that she planned to bring her baby with her. Her husband was running a coaching business so could work round their baby's needs as well. They both liked the approach "It takes a village to raise a child" and to that end they were grateful to have Sarah's parents living only 200 yards from them, so there was a family community to hand for a start. The grandparents were able to see their grandchildren every day to the great enjoyment of both. Also this meant that the children were always in a loving and nurturing environment.

Sarah's parents travelled with them whenever they went away, or indeed abroad. There was a good deal of travel involved in her top-level sporting activities, and it was wonderful for her, she said, to have her husband and parents always travelling with her. Wherever they were in the world there were always these loved familiar people to settle the children so they always felt secure.

Sarah is a great advocate of co-sleeping and she strongly encourages this, although she commented that a number of people criticise her for it. But she believes this gives the infant the best security and comfort all night long, and she is still breast feeding at night her little boy, Charlie, now 17 months, and she is more than happy to do this in spite of people telling her off! Sarah laughingly recounted a particular memory of being totally exhausted after a gold-medal-winning performance, finishing in a

collapsed state, but had to breastfeed immediately: If that is what a child wants, then you do it! Her daughter is very supportive of her sporting efforts and attends all her races and shouts “Go go go Mum!” from the side!

Louisa really wanted a baby brother or sister and so Sarah confessed that she therefore had to go through another Caesarean, although she did joke that she was used to it by now! She added that Louisa wasn't the only one who wanted another family member. She and her husband made a point of, as she described it, “immersing” Louisa in the baby's arrival and involving her in every aspect of the baby's care. They all thrived on this approach.

Taking the baby “to work” was certainly not always easy and there was a lot of backpack-wearing by both Sarah and her husband, but there was no doubt in her mind that this was important for family life, to be together. She was always grateful for the support she was given by both her parents, and her husband, as she worked to combine her mothering with her training, and her highly successful career with being part of a loving family. She said her own parents had been wonderful parents to her, and that they were definitely her role models.

Sarah thought that the four year gap between her children was quite helpful too, in that the older child was more independent and also the little girl positively liked to help, and she was able to help in a number of ways by that time.

Six-year-old Louisa is now very happy at school and Sarah made the comment “independence is dependence” which she quoted from a book on neurobiology! Another quote was “Above all it is about happiness, and happiness is above all” – a ringing endorsement on ‘Being Mum’.

Summary written by Diana Dean.