

A family AGAINST THE ODDS

After adopting her son from Russia, Sandrine Gallien, 40, decided to have one last try at IVF. Here, she tells Katherine Baldwin about the unconventional way she created her family

Photograph Jenny Lewis

People are always telling us we look alike as a family. Mathieu, who's four, and Melisande, who's one, both have dark brown eyes like me and we all have a similar complexion. From the outside, nobody would know we adopted our son after seven years of trying for a baby, or that our daughter was a huge surprise on our third round of IVF. Even my husband Cedrik says he now sometimes forgets how we made our family.

For Mathieu's first Christmas, we woke him up at midnight on Christmas Eve, which is when we celebrate in France. He was so happy when he realised some of the presents were for him. I hope it will be the same for Melisande this year.

They're bonding like any brother and sister would; it's lovely to watch. Of course, they take each other's toys and squabble over things, but the magical moments are when they're rolling around on the floor together or making each other laugh. He'll sing her nursery rhymes and show her how her toys work. He's like a god to her, so funny and clever. Bath time is the best - she finds his splashing hysterical, and seeing her so happy makes him splash even more.

In those moments, being a parent makes perfect sense - although, it's been a long time coming. For six months after



Sandrine with her son Mathieu, four, and daughter Melisande, one

Melisande was born, I couldn't enjoy it. I'd been fighting so long and so hard to create our family that, shortly after her birth, something in me just snapped.

My post-natal depression was a shock, and very scary at times. I finally had everything I'd always wanted - a boy and a girl and a loving husband - but I felt lost and panicked at the thought of looking after my children on my own.

In the mornings, I'd arrive at the nursery school gates exhausted from sleepless nights and breastfeeding. The other mothers couldn't grasp why having a newborn was such a drama for me; I already had a child. But I didn't know anything about babies as we'd adopted Mathieu from Russia at 11 months, when he was already sleep-trained.

I felt I didn't have a right to complain - I had a biological child after years of infertility. But I didn't know where I belonged. I no longer felt totally part

of the adoptive community, but I didn't feel part of the club of mothers with biological children either, because I cherished our adoption story so much. I think I'll always feel in the middle.

With support from Cedrik, my mum and good friends, in time, something shifted. I realised I don't have to be a supermum. Now I enjoy my children, enjoy the special times, and can appreciate how blessed I am.

There is a difference between having an adopted and a biological child. I think with Mathieu we over-analyse things - when he's misbehaving, we ask ourselves if there's something we're missing, something we should have done better. But probably he's just acting like any child with a new sibling. After all, he had our undivided attention for two years.

He's testing the boundaries right now. It's like he wants to be the baby again - he'll try to climb into his sister's >>