

Rachel's Babies

Discover how her love for babies led a farmers' wife to rub shoulders with Hollywood glitterati. Words and photos by Rachel Lovell

Not many Devon business ladies can count Hollywood A-listers among their clients, but Rachel Waddilove has a specialism that crosses every boundary. "People call me a childcare expert, but really I'm there to be like an older sister, or a mum; a guide and a comforter," she explains.

My collie is leaning luxuriously against Rachel's legs as she smooths his head, whilst my ten-month-old baby, Violet, is in her high chair finishing lunch, silently eyeing this new arrival. Rachel said a gentle hello to her when she entered the room, but has not pushed for a smile as many people do on meeting a baby. Her no-pressure presence reminds me of how an experienced vet handles a flighty animal; calmly and confidently taking time to make their patient relax. At length she opens her hands to offer a cuddle, and I am amazed to see Violet lean toward her, out of my arms.

"My main work over the years has been living with families and their newborn babies." Violet contentedly plays with Rachel's scarf as she continues. "I go in just after the baby is born and am there for anything from a few days to six weeks. I'm there for mum and dad – to teach them what to do."

There is no question that Rachel offers the voice of experience. The eldest of six children, she has cared for several hundred babies in the past forty years.

"I trained as a nursery nurse in the 1960s in a Dr Barnardo's home in Kent. It was before the pill and the Abortion Act,



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so we had hundreds and hundreds of newborns so my training was very hands on."

The effectiveness of Rachel's skills have taken her all over the world, and ultimately to the publication of two books, one for the baby years and the other for toddler parenting.

"Almost all of my clients come through word of mouth. I've worked for royalty, MPs and TV personalities, lords and ladies, you know, and people like you and me. I'll go wherever the call comes in from.

"I did a lot in Monte Carlo about 10 or 15 years ago, and I was back in America this year, in Chicago, and I've done New York, and been to California to work with celebrities there."

There is something wonderful about picturing this kindly farmer's wife from

Dunsford amidst such glamorous surroundings. She is so modest, her chic clothing is the only clue that she has such connections. It was very tempting to ask for details but Rachel is completely professional about client confidentiality. However, a visit to her website gives a peek into this world, where praise for her work includes a quote from one Gwyneth Paltrow.

"The main thing that comes through the website is telephone consultations. It's really for help with specific problems, most commonly lack of sleep," explains Rachel. "Often if you've got a child not sleeping you can have feeding issues as well – they are so tired that they are not eating, so often those two things go together."

But can a phone call really help solve such deep-seated problems?

"I just wasn't sure if it ever would, but you know it really works. The majority of the girls I help I never meet, but they'll either send me a little card or ring me and say, fantastic! So, it's great really because I can help many more people by doing it this way."

At this point Violet, who has been playing with the laces on Rachel's boots, crawls into a corner by the dresser and adopts a glazed expression and a pink hue. "I think it's wonderful how even at this early age they want a bit of privacy for these moments," says Rachel, "You just get on with it – you'll feel much better after that!"

As a new mother myself, I was interested to know Rachel's thoughts on why her skills are in such demand.

"I think most couples with new babies are very anxious about doing things wrong... there is a lot of fear and this takes the enjoyment away from having a baby."

"I think there is also a lack of support as the health professionals are very busy and often don't have time to spend with new mums. Parents are much softer than they used to be but I believe this is out of innocence. They haven't been taught how to parent and their mums are perhaps not around to give advice."



It seems that there needs to be a Rachel Waddilove in every community in the UK.

"Really it's an ideal job for a woman who's had a family, who loves babies and children but doesn't want to go back to work full-time but would love to help people locally."

Rachel also has a new venture on the boil. There are plenty of classes available which focus on birth preparation, but very little to help couples learn about what to do with the baby once they are home. "Girls come out of hospital so quickly these days, within as little as six hours, whereas I was in for a fortnight! To help them get off on the best start with their little ones I'm teaching ante-natal classes with a difference, covering all the practical stuff."

I had to ask if dealing with so many unwanted babies in the Dr Barnado's home had affected her.

"I have often wondered what happened to the mums and the babies. There was no counselling for single mums in those days. I just love babies so felt very blessed to be able to train with them. I think I simply felt a huge amount of love for them, but probably didn't understand the implications of it all as I hadn't had a family of my own, and I think that changes how you feel about children; you can't imagine what it would feel like to hand your baby over."

"But now, if I can get a baby to settle into a pattern, really sleeping between feeds, and mum relaxed and feeling that she can cope with it all, if I can leave a family like that, then I think OK, I've done the job I came here to do." □

Rachel's next course is on 10 February at The Rougemont Hotel in Exeter. Visit rachelsbabies.com for details or call 01460 30151.



Win! Win! Win! Competition

We have signed copies of Rachel's two books up for grabs. Send a postcard with your name, address and telephone number to Devon Life/Rachel's Babies Competition, Archant House, Babbage Road, Totnes, Devon TQ9 5JA. You can also enter online at devon.greatbritishlife.co.uk. The first two entries drawn on the closing date, 18 February 2011, will be declared the winners.