

PROUD MUM ON WHY HER DOWN SYNDROME GIRL IS JUST LIKE ANY OTHER CHILD ...

■ Naomi McELROY

WHEN Carina McNally was expecting her third child, she used to pray that her baby would have Down Syndrome.

A routine scan had discovered abnormalities and doctors warned that her tiny infant had one of three syndromes — two of which were not compatible with life.

Their best hope was that the baby would have Down Syndrome.

Carina recalls: "The doctors told us our child had Edwards, Patau or Down Syndrome.

"The first two aren't compatible with life, you either miscarry or the baby passes away usually just hours after being born.

"Obviously we were praying for Down Syndrome out of those three options."

Carina was just 11 weeks pregnant when she and husband Brendan were told of their unborn child's health problems.

She says doctors first realised something was wrong when they spotted a large halo of fluid around her baby's head during a routine scan.

Procedure

"We were devastated, we knew that whatever happened from that point on it wasn't going to be smooth sailing," recalls Carina.

Carina and Brendan decided she would undergo another procedure to determine exactly what condition their baby had.

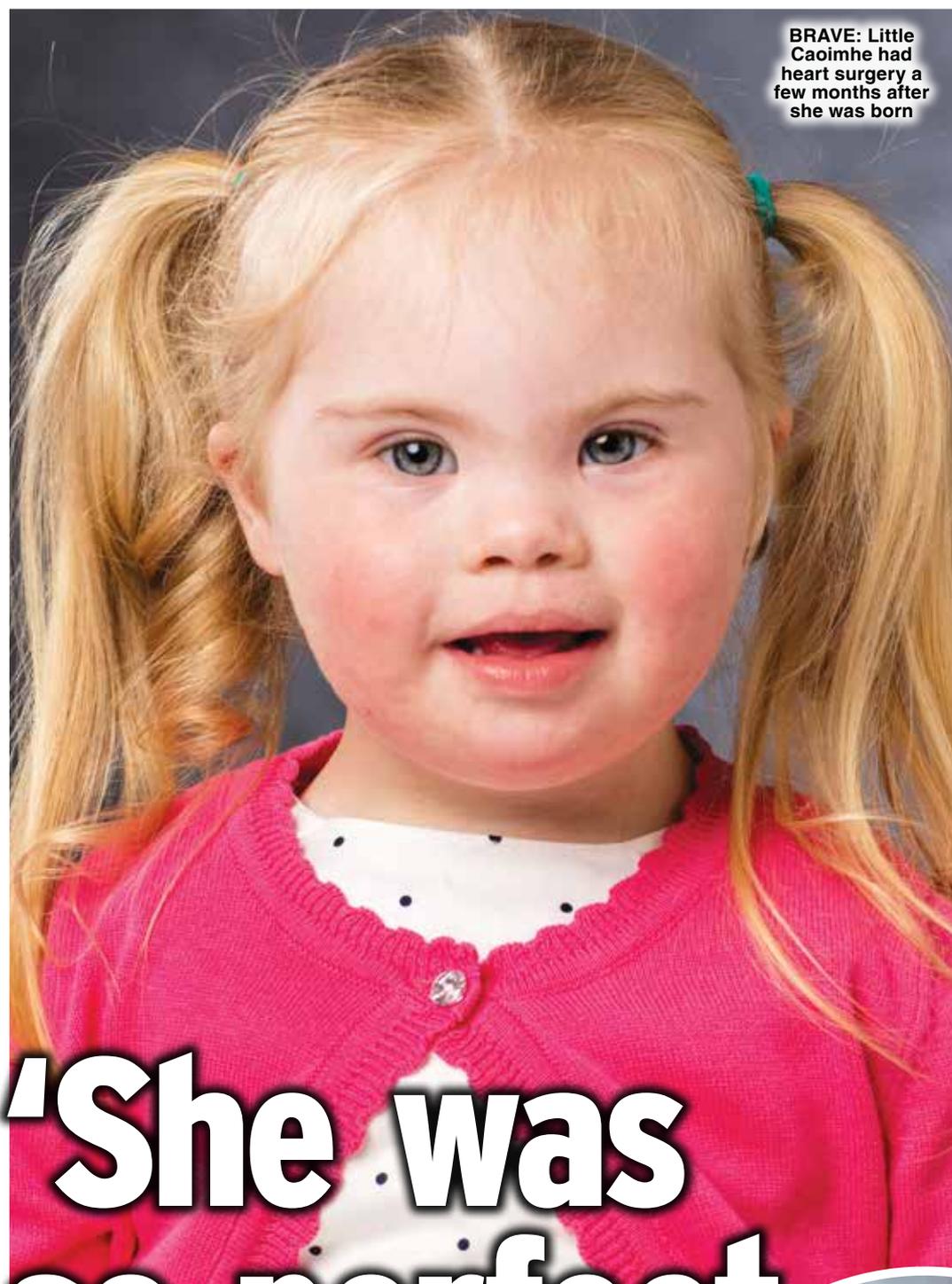
It slightly raised the risk of miscarriage by just one per cent, but Carina felt she needed to know so she could tell their other children what to expect.

She explains: "We had two other kids Daniel, now eight years old, and Aisling, now six, and we needed to be able to tell them if they were having an angel or a baby brother or sister."

The test confirmed the couple were expecting a little girl with Down Syndrome.



HAPPY FAMILY: Brendan and Carina with son Daniel and daughters Aisling and Caoimhe



BRAVE: Little Caoimhe had heart surgery a few months after she was born

'She was so perfect and tiny'

Carina, who lives in Enfield, Co Meath, says: "We went off and told everybody in the family and just let the news filter through.

"It was hard to take in. I wasn't in the high risk age group for Down Syndrome and I'd had two healthy children previously.

She adds: "We were in and out of Holles Street constantly and at around the 20 week mark the cardiologist in Crumlin confirmed the baby had heart trouble and would definitely need open heart surgery shortly after birth.

"It all depends on the first breath the baby takes when they are born, it can either blow the holes in the heart wide open, in which case it will need surgery straight away, or it can stabilise.

"If that happens they'll try to leave it until the baby is six months old and has put on weight before trying the surgery.

"The doctors could tell that our baby had three significant holes in her heart.

"She was due on December 29 but when I went in two weeks before that, they weren't happy with her growth.

"It had levelled off, she wasn't growing the way she should be, so they decided to induce me the next day.

Lucky

"I was in a panic, it was Christmas week, I was getting everything ready for Santa, my little boy had his first school play the following day and I had to miss it.

"But I was lucky, Brendan and I had great support from both our families."

When little Caoimhe was born it was love at first sight, although Carina is honest enough to admit she was worried about how she would react to her child.

"When we first found out she had Down Syndrome I was terrified that I'd look at her and just see Down Syndrome and not her.

"I didn't know anybody with Down Syndrome.

"But she was gorgeous and she had Aisling's nose and Daniel's mouth, she was so tiny and perfect and beautiful."

Little Caoimhe was clearly a fighter too, undergoing open heart surgery at just five and a half months old.

Her mum recalls: "After the operation the difference in her was just insane.

"Suddenly she wasn't grey any more, we hadn't even really understood how poorly she was until she was better."

Today little Caoimhe is a happy and lively three year old who happens to have Down Syndrome and epilepsy.

Fighting

But that's not all she has - the bubbly toddler has a love of slides, a brother and sister who adore her and a fighting spirit that helped her survive heart surgery and learn sign language.

Last Easter, her family watched with delight as Caoimhe took her first steps.

Carina explains: "She's starting play school in September and I really wanted her to be able to walk in the door herself. I'd like her to be as like the other kids as possible.

"She just has to work so hard to get there."

Carina and Caoimhe are sharing their story as part of 21 Faces, a Down Syndrome Centre campaign that wants to show that children with Down Syndrome are all different and unique individuals - just like the rest of us.

Carina said: "When I was pregnant somebody said to me you'll always have Santy in your house, they never grow up.

"People have this perception that kids with Down Syndrome are constantly happy and smiling but Caoimhe can throw a tantrum with the best of them!

"The point of the campaign is that these are children, like any other children - some are blonde, some have red hair, they all like different things, they all have different personalities.

"Caoimhe loves swings and slides, you can't get her out of the playground, and she loves just being in the centre of everything."

Carina admits that she has had some bad experiences along the way.

"Some people avoid you when they hear your child has Down Syndrome, I think it's because they don't know what to say and they're so afraid of saying the wrong thing they prefer to just avoid you altogether."

"I have had people actually avoid the pram when I'm out and about, and there are people who stare - I'd always prefer someone to just come up and ask me a question than stare at Caoimhe."

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21 faces is a campaign by the Down Syndrome Centre to celebrate the uniqueness and diversity of children with DS. Now in its third year, the campaign features 21 adorable children with Down Syndrome to try to show the public there is no "typical" person with Down Syndrome. Instead the campaign asks us to see past the condition and see the child and their potential instead - see downsyndromecentre.ie for more.

