



Choosing a Baby Name

First there was Apple and Rumor, and now there's Knox and Zuma in a string of exotic baby names Hollywood stars like Angelina Jolie and Gwen Stefani have bestowed upon their trend-setting babes. Even parents far removed from the paparazzi spotlight have followed suit - with names like Chase and Destiny replacing John and Mary on neighborhood playgrounds.

Parents have become much more conscious about the power of a name, says Pamela Redmond Satran, co-author of *The Baby Name Bible*. She points to a heightened awareness of branding, style, and image in our fashion-forward culture that trickles down to the naming process.

Yet what's in vogue one year and out the next is impossible to predict. Old Testament names like Ethan and Noah are in. Virtuous names like Faith and Serenity are in. And flower names like Lily and Violet are in. And let's not forget a whole generation of Olivias and Aidens that has shot up dramatically to the top of the charts - seemingly out of the blue.

"Even though our values might be different and the particular style of name we're choosing might be different, we have a lot of agreement on what sounds pretty," says Laura Wattenberg, author of *The Baby Name Wizard*. "When people choose a name, we don't realize how much we are influenced by the world around us."

The Days of a Zillion Jennifer's Are Over

Parents today are obsessing about baby names, Wattenberg tells WebMD. "More than ever before, parents seem focused on finding a name that is distinctive - a name that everybody likes and nobody uses," she says.

There's a lot of fear of common names today, she adds. "Jennifer is the boogieman that parents hold out there," she says. "They say, 'I don't want my daughter to be one of three Jennifer's in her class.'"

In fact, there isn't a single name that matches the popularity of Jennifer anymore. "If you look at the No. 1 girl's name today, it's only a fraction as popular as names of past generations," she says. "So the first thing to remember is that there's no such thing as a name so normal that it's likely to be everywhere."

Desperately Seeking Answers to the Baby Name Riddle

As due dates approach, many expectant parents are busy combing through dozens of name books and web sites. Parents are spending a lot more time and energy on picking a name, says Satran. "Hearing so many more opinions has increased the anxiety level from 20 years ago," she says.

It's really hard to pick a name for your baby, agrees Melanie Davis, vice president of Communications at the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce. "This is the name they are going to be stuck with for the rest of their lives," she says, "and you don't want them to hate you later on in life."

Davis and her husband, Brian, wanted to incorporate a family name and while visiting her in-laws one weekend, Brian's father mentioned his father's name. She looked at her husband and they both smiled at the name Preston, which they proceeded to use for their son.

Some parents go the traditional route and search their family trees. Some find inspiration on maps, movies, and even ESPN. Others are intent on finding a personal connection, or a story, behind a name.

It took only 10 seconds for Karen Watts, a book developer in Westchester County, N.Y., to settle on her son's name. He is named Cooper after Cooperstown, the home of the Baseball Hall of Fame, where she and her husband, both diehard Yankees fans, shared their first date.

Joanne Rendell, a novelist in New York City, named her 5-year-old son Benny after her favorite Mexican restaurant in the East Village, Benny's Burritos. "I ate there all the time when I was pregnant and now it's my son's favorite place to eat," she says.

"My second child named herself," says Ursula von Rydingsvard, chief operating officer of YouHere Productions in Manhattan. Six months pregnant, she was covering fashion week in Paris and her baby would kick every time a Belgian model named Delfine walked down the runway. She and her husband didn't know the sex of the baby, but three months later, they decided to name their baby girl Delfine.

What's in a Baby Name, Anyway?

Choosing a name should be fun, says Wattenberg. "It's the most fun and forward-thinking you do preparing for a baby. It makes you step back and picture an entire lifespan ahead, not just a baby but a kid and a grown-up. That's exciting, but it's also a lot of pressure."

People who have high self-esteem tend to like their names more, according to a recent study from the department of psychology at Cardiff University in Wales. This is called the "mere-ownership effect," -- that is, if we like ourselves, the feeling spills over to things that belong to us, and vice versa.

It makes intuitive sense, says Satran, who is the creator of a new site called Nameberry.com. She recommends thinking twice before saddling your child with a clunky name like Agatha or Floyd. "That's definitely an argument in favor of choosing a name your child is going to like," she says.

Instead of relying on an intuitive, emotional approach, parents should be more objective, says Albert Mehrabian, PhD, professor emeritus of psychology at UCLA and author of *The Baby Name Report Card*. He designed a survey rating system based on characteristics such as success, ethical/caring, and popular/fun.

He warns parents not to get too creative. "As names become more unusual," he says, "the reactions to them become less desirable. The pleasantness of the individual as implied by the name drops - producing anxiety or stress ."

For example, the name Adam gets an average success score of 99 (extremely high) whereas the name Abbott has a success score of four (extremely low). Mehrabian also notes that nicknames can give off a negative impression. Take Samantha, which gets an overall rating of 98, but the shortened Sam only scores a 23.

He points to his own name Albert, which gets an overall score of 54, but Al rates a 4. "Before I did this research, whenever people called me 'Al,' I would just cringe," he says. "When I did this study, I found out why I didn't like it."

Keep the perspective of the outside world when you're naming your child, says Mehrabian. "Think about it not in terms of your gut level reaction," he says, "but more how the world out there might react to your child with that particular name."

At Wit's End and Baby Name Remorse

For some couples, the baby name discussion can lead to heated debates. "Names can bring up deep-seated feelings about ethnicity, self-image, and gender identity," says Satran. "The ultimate goal is to try to accommodate each other's feelings and arrive at a name that addresses both of your feelings."

For her eldest son, Satran had her heart set on her father's name, Joseph. So as a compromise, she let her husband choose the middle name on his own. When he told her at the hospital he picked Leopold, she was surprised and put off but kept her end of the bargain - and the name has grown on her.

Some parents agonize over the naming process, but have a change of heart after the big decision and experience baby name remorse.

Kelcey Kintner, who blogs at The Mama Bird Diaries, says she and her husband had difficulty choosing a girl's name and finally settled on Presley. But from the moment her daughter was born, she didn't look like a Presley. Instead, they nicknamed her Summer, a name the couple hadn't even discussed. First they told friends and family; now they plan to legally change it.

"If a child is young enough and the parent really feels awful about it and the spouse is in agreement, then maybe the best thing is to change the name before the child starts responding to it," says Satran. "But if it's a case where the parents disagree and the baby's already there, then you should learn to live with it. A lot of times people are overreacting. As your child gets older, it's less and less about you, and more and more about them."

How to Pick the Perfect Baby Name

"The wonderful thing about baby naming is that it doesn't cost you any money and nobody is sending you ads and coupons telling you what to do," says Wattenberg. "It's the one place that's just between you and the child - and it's a place to dream

about the future."

To succeed in your quest for the perfect baby name, keep in mind these simple strategies:

Share your top picks discreetly by selecting a few friends whose taste you trust and use them as a sounding board. "If you actually think your family and friends are all going to hate the name you chose, that's a warning sign," says Wattenberg.

Spell it with ease. "A lot of parents try to make a name distinctive by spelling it differently," she says, "but you spend most of your life saying names, not spelling them." Kids like having a standard spelling because they like finding their names in books and other places.

Think like a local. "Naming style is a local thing," says Wattenberg. "Landon is a perfect example of a name that is a top five huge hit in certain areas of the country, like Louisiana but not Massachusetts." You can also check popular names by hospital in your area at the Baby NameScape web site.

Put yourself in his or her shoes. "My No. 1 tip is to stop and pretend you're naming yourself," she says. "If you're starting out in your life today, is this what you would want to represent you? If so, that's a pretty good sign that you're in the right direction for your baby."

SOURCES: Pamela Redmond Satran, co-author, *The Baby Name Bible*. Laura Wattenberg, author, *The Baby Name Wizard*. Melanie Davis, vice president of communications, Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce, Birmingham, Ala. Karen Watts, book developer, Westchester County, N.Y. Joanne Rendell, novelist, New York. Ursula von Rydingsvard, chief operating officer, YouHere Productions, New York. Gebauer, J. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Sept. 5, 2008; vol 44: pp 1346-1354. Albert Mehrabian, PhD, professor emeritus of psychology, UCLA; author, *The Baby Name Report Card*. Kelcey Kintner, blogger, www.MamaBirdDiaries.com.

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