

Chapter 1

What's in a Name?

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So why do people make such a fuss about choosing the right name? After all, it's just a label. Life would be so much simpler if we were all assigned unique ID numbers at birth, right? Despite the occasional oddity who may legally change his name to "789223," we have a strong sense that names are more than just an arbitrary "handle" for identifying and addressing people. Across the scope of time and space, names have been used for description, to identify a person's place in society, to shape a person's life and character, even sometimes as a type of magic charm to bless or protect the bearer.

Okay, so you thought parenting was going to be tough, and now you may think choosing a name will be even tougher. Well, don't worry. I've broken down some general ideas on choosing names in this chapter so you can get warmed up for your quest for *the name*.

Making Sure You Understand the Process

When you distract yourself from the serious terrors of parenting with the less daunting task of choosing the exactly right name for your child, it can be useful to keep in mind two opposing principles:

- ✔ **You can't win:** No matter what name you pick, there's a 50-50 chance that your child will hate it at some point. The child given a dignified traditional name will bewail the cultural straitjacket you've imposed on him and declare that henceforth he will only answer to "Sablewolf." The child with the imaginative colorful name will be permanently scarred by having to constantly correct people's pronunciation and spelling. The name carefully chosen to have only positive associations will appear in next year's hit sitcom for the obnoxious buffoon. And your favorite nickname for your child will pop up in the next generation's slang with a really unfortunate meaning. You can't win. Don't sweat it.
- ✔ **This isn't about you:** As a friend of mine is fond of pointing out, children are named when they're very small and unable to defend themselves. You see your child's name as an opportunity for creative expression, but she's going to have to wear it. This isn't going to be a fancy holiday outfit that the kid only has to squirm through a few parties in — it's going to be her second skin. Pick the name the way you would a special gift: something the receiver can use and make their own, not something meant to look pretty on a shelf but totally impractical in everyday life.

Planning the Decision Process

Because you are reading this book, I assume that you're interested in putting some thought into the decision process. (Either that, or you simply enjoy reading name books.) The key factor is not to leave things until the last minute. Very few people have their greatest creativity under pressure — the rest of us do better when we have some breathing space for our brainstorming. When you think you've found *the name*, allow some time for it to grow on you or to grow stale. If you're tired of a name before the baby comes, then it probably wasn't the perfect name after all. Give yourself a chance to bounce your ideas off other people.

Knowing the Territory

Names don't exist in a vacuum. Much of your and your child's experience depends not simply on the choice of name, but on how that name fits into present and past naming cultures. As a foretaste, Figure 1-1 shows the top-ten most popular names for boys and girls for each decade of the last century. Notice that it isn't simply the individual names that change in position, but the overall nature of the popular names may change dramatically over time.

Figure 1-1:
A chart showing the top-ten boys' and girls' names over the last century.

Boys (31 different names)											
Rank	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
1	John	John	Robert	Robert	James	Michael	Michael	Michael	Michael	Michael	Jacob
2	William	William	John	James	Robert	James	David	Christopher	Christopher	Christopher	Michael
3	James	James	James	John	John	Robert	John	Jason	Matthew	Matthew	Joshua
4	George	Robert	William	William	William	John	James	David	Joshua	Joshua	Matthew
5	Joseph	Joseph	Charles	Richard	Richard	David	Robert	James	David	Jacob	Andrew
6	Charles	George	George	Charles	David	William	Mark	John	Daniel	Andrew	Joseph
7	Robert	Charles	Joseph	Donald	Charles	Richard	William	Robert	James	Daniel	Ethan
8	Frank	Edward	Richard	George	Thomas	Thomas	Richard	Brian	Robert	Nicholas	Daniel
9	Edward	Frank	Edward	Thomas	Michael	Mark	Thomas	William	John	Tyler	Christopher
10	Henry	Walter	Donald	Joseph	Ronald	Charles	Jeffrey	Matthew	Joseph	Joseph	Anthony
Girls (55 different names)											
Rank	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
1	Mary	Mary	Mary	Mary	Mary	Mary	Lisa	Jennifer	Jessica	Ashley	Emily
2	Helen	Helen	Dorothy	Betty	Linda	Linda	Mary	Amy	Jennifer	Jessica	Emma
3	Margaret	Dorothy	Helen	Barbara	Barbara	Patricia	Karen	Melissa	Amanda	Emily	Madison
4	Anna	Margaret	Betty	Shirley	Patricia	Susan	Susan	Michelle	Ashley	Sarah	Hannah
5	Ruth	Ruth	Margaret	Patricia	Carol	Deborah	Kimberly	Kimberly	Sarah	Samantha	Olivia
6	Elizabeth	Mildred	Ruth	Dorothy	Sandra	Barbara	Patricia	Lisa	Stephanie	Britany	Abigail
7	Dorothy	Anna	Virginia	Joan	Nancy	Debra	Linda	Angela	Melissa	Amanda	Alexis
8	Marie	Elizabeth	Doris	Margaret	Judith	Karen	Donna	Heather	Nicole	Elizabeth	Ashley
9	Mildred	Frances	Mildred	Nancy	Sharon	Nancy	Michelle	Stephanie	Elizabeth	Taylor	Elizabeth
10	Alice	Marie	Elizabeth	Helen	Susan	Donna	Cynthia	Jessica	Heather	Megan	Samantha

Exploring ideas of naming

Across the ages, names have been chosen by many different methods. Your name may indicate your place in the family. It may give other circumstances of birth, such as the day of the week or some special holiday. There may be a traditional formula that assigns each child the name of a particular relative. Some cultures give you a “baby name” to start with and then an adult

name when you grow into it. In other cultures you may change your name to commemorate a notable event in your life, or to change your luck. It’s not uncommon in some cultures to have multiple names used for different purposes — we do this informally in America, but in other cultures the names may be very different from each other but all have legal status.

Sharing the Fun

Some of you may be looking forward to raising a child on your own, but most will be sharing the experience with a partner. And if you’re fortunate, your child’s life will also be full of relatives and friends who have a stake in seeing him grow up happy.

Remember to share the fun of choosing a name with the other key people in your child’s life. This isn’t to say that you need to try to please everyone, but try to show that you value their opinions. If it seems like one parent feels much more strongly about names, the other parent may bow out of the process to avoid conflict and feel left out. Always leave room for negotiation. If it’s absolutely imperative that your first son be named after your father, suggest that your partner choose a diminutive of the name for everyday. If you’re dead set against a particular type of name, try to explain why, rather than making it sound arbitrary.