

The Name Game

What's in a name? For parents – everything. Your child's name is the first thing you give him or her – but will it be a gift or a punishment? Our name is the first thing we share about ourselves. Even without our permission, our name can travel around without us, dragging our reputation with it. Behind our name is a veritable file cabinet of everything good or bad that we have ever done. Our name alone can make people smile, laugh, cry or shout.

Our sense of self is so closely tied to our names, and yet, it's something our parents chose, not us. With so much to gain and lose in one, two, or three words, the stakes are impossibly high when deciding what to name a child. That's why there are books, websites, and even paid professionals devoted to the subject. Seeking something both parents love to call their child is important, because they'll be saying it more often and in more ways than anyone else.

The perfect name sounds nice out loud, looks good on paper, and bears some significance. A name's meaning can be implied directly by definition or as an indirect extension of the parents' culture, family, interests, or values. For practical purposes, a name must be easy to spell and pronounce. It should be unique without being weird. It defies trends, remaining appropriate for a baby and an elderly person, and every age in between.

Parents want their child to stand out, but not in an embarrassing way. A parent's greatest fear in choosing a child's name is that it will cause ridicule. My favorite place in Ireland is Dingle, which isn't a good name for any child, particularly not when your last name is Barberry. It's in County Kerry, a beautiful name, which just so happens to rhyme with our surname, a big no-no on the elementary school playground. During both pregnancies, when students asked me what I was going to name my baby, I'd tell them, "Barry for a boy and Barbara for a girl." It took them a few minutes, but then they'd laugh and beg me not to do that to my child. After some of the questionable names I've seen on my class rosters over the years, I knew better.

More often than not, a baby's name is a compromise both parents must make. Little girls plan their weddings and name their future children long before meeting their husbands. Many men would like to have a "junior" running around or give tribute to a personal hero in naming their child. It's a weighty decision with a definite deadline and nine months to hash it out.

Simple differences in personal aesthetics can lead to near shouting matches. During my first pregnancy, I liked the name Kinsale - another beautiful town in Ireland - for a girl, and Grafton - a family name on my husband's side- for a boy, but he protested. "We're not celebrities!" he said, pointing out that both names were rather unusual. As a teacher, it was important for my child's name to be the only one in his or her class. I didn't want my child's lunch or grade or disciplinary record to be accidentally confused with someone else's. I didn't want my child to have to write a capital B after his or her name to be distinguished on art projects and in conversations. I wanted my child to feel special.

Hopefully my boys will like the names I've chosen for them. I've withheld them up until this point, but for the sake of simpler pronoun use, I will reveal their names and why we chose them in my next blog post.