

Names & PAPERWORK

Some people have the first names all ready for a boy or a girl: some even know the gender and the name before the baby is born. Others um and er over names for weeks – even months – after the baby's born.

I couldn't find any research on this at all, just billions of books and websites full of lists of baby names; nothing to help people who seem unable to close their eyes and jump with a name.

And once you've decided on a name, who do you need to tell, what lists should your baby be on and what other paperwork has to be done?

choosing a first name

Some cultures give their newborn babies a cute name or 'milk name', which may be a diminutive of the formal name or a nickname: Carmelita instead of Carmel; Bird instead of George. In this way the formal name is in waiting. Some names – such as Reginald or Lucretia – don't suit babies. But Reggie or Lulu might, until they need the other one.

Don't let family members or a bureaucratic official stampede you into naming your baby in the first week or two just so they can write something down on their form. Say firmly 'No, *don't* put down "Ferdie". We'll let you know when we've decided.'

Part of the problem may be that you're waiting for the kid to 'look like' a certain name. This is no good: it actually works the other way round. You give the baby a name and they start looking like it.

You may have some psychological trouble putting a name to the amazing thing that's happened in your life, represented by this little person. Explain to yourself you're not describing the whole head-spinning trip, just giving the kid a name. If you're still having trouble naming your baby after a few months, it's probably a good idea to have a chat with a counsellor – not because you're crazy, but because at this stage of everyone's parenting life and lack of sleep, an independent eye on the situation is often a good idea. Your GP can recommend a psychologist. And don't be embarrassed. Your GP has seen people so much more confused or indecisive than you that you don't even figure on the scale.

If as a couple you can't agree, think about it for a while, then find three names you could each live with and do the hat thing. Promise that you'll go with the order they come out of the hat. If you pull Luke first, then Luke it is. You do have to be a responsible parent at this point, and part of your job is to name the child. There is no wrong answer. Any decent name will become your child's own, and you'll love your kid and their name: eventually they'll be indistinguishable.

You can still use nicknames. Other kids in the future will bestow their own nicknames: you can't control what your child is called forever. ('Well, her name is Penelope. Nobody will be able to call her Penny.')

Don't saddle your kid with a name that usually belongs to the other gender: Kim goes both ways, but Fifi and Butch really don't. Leave the kid to make up their own cross-gender names in the future if they want to.

Stick with the name and keep using it – everyone will grow to accept it. All names seem okay, then weird, then okay again. Everyone has second thoughts and wonders if the name they’ve given is right. If you feel sure you’ve actually used the wrong name rather than just being unsure about it, change it – but only change once. You can’t keep dickering around.

Your child may change their name when they grow up. I know one boy who was bored with his name, changed it at 3 to Huckle and took that into adulthood. Others have changed their New Age names to mainstream ones or vice versa. Most young kids, sometimes at about 4 years old, either insist that you use their formal name, not a diminutive or a nickname, or make up an imaginative one for themselves.

family names

Most babies are given the family name of their father, stemming from the days when a wife and children were seen to be owned by the man. Some are given the family name of their mother. Some get a double-barrelled name, and some have their mother or father’s family name as a middle name to avoid the hyphen. Some mothers use their own family name professionally and use their husband’s or partner’s name for anything to do with the child’s world, such as school. Personally I only ever use my partner’s name if I’m trying to hide my involvement in an off-shore diamond heist or otherwise behaving suspiciously, and my daughter has her dad’s last name because, let’s face it, who wants to have your mother’s name when she’s written books called *Up the Duff* and *Kidwrangling*?

registering a name

Each state or territory has a local registry of births, deaths and marriages (how old-fashioned) that requires you to register your baby’s name within a certain time (say, three weeks or two months). Your maternity hospital should give you a form; if not, you can ring up the registry. If you don’t register a child’s names, all sorts of benefits may be denied them because they officially don’t exist. A child can be registered without a first name, then that name added later. A child who is months old before they are registered will usually have their details double-checked with the hospital where they were born or with the attending doctor at a home birth. Each child, whether a twin, a triplet or whatever, must have their own form.

All sorts of ludicrous details that are none of the state’s business may be required

on the registration form, including the age, marital status and occupation of the parents (mothers in the past almost always had their occupation put down on their marriage certificate as 'spinster' and on the birth certificate, ever so respectfully, as 'none').

A very boring bureaucrat insisted to me on the phone that mothers who knew the father of their child must put his name on the certificate: this is partly so government agencies can try to chase him for support money. If you don't want the father's name on the certificate because you don't know who it is, or because you know he'll never want to be involved with you or your child, you may have to say officially he's unknown, but don't let them actually write 'unknown' on the certificate as this can be hurtful to your child in later life. Make sure it says something neutral such as 'not stated' or is left blank.

Unfortunately some bureaucrats can be very inflexible about things such as this: don't let yourself be bullied. You may need to have the advice of a solicitor who specialises in family law before you fill in the birth certificate and decide what to put down. Many people believe it's always a child's right to know who their father is: this is a separate issue from whether the father's name should be on the birth certificate.

PUTTING YOUR KID'S NAME 'DOWN'

Putting a kid's name down used to be essential only for people whose kiddliwinks were trotting off to the sort of private school that has a waiting list as long as the list of prefects who went on to join the Liberal Party. These days – AND I'M ONLY GOING TO WARN YOU ONCE, MY FRIENDS (well, okay, the warning's also in the book, in Chapter 38, 'Child Care, Kinder & Preschool') – you need to put your child's name down for child care, preschool or kinder and, in some cases, school WHEN THEY ARE BORN. I know some of you think this is mad and you'll ignore it. Just don't have a tantie in three years' time when the kid has missed out on a place.

other paperwork

Wills

You, or you and the baby's other parent if there is one handy, should agree on who is to have care of your child should anything happen to all available parents and put this down in a legal will, or your wishes may not be followed. Consult your family

lawyer, or contact Legal Aid or a community legal service (use your search engine or phone service provider's directory line).