<http://www.livescience.com/6569-good-bad-baby-names-long-lasting-effects.html>

**Good or Bad, Baby Names Have Long-lasting Effects**

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Date: 13 June 2010 Time: 10:31 AM ET

Choosing a baby name proves to be a challenging task for many parents. And they're wise to work hard at it. A name can have a profound impact on a child that reverberates well into adulthood, a growing body of research suggests.

"There is a reason why baby name books are extremely popular," said David Figlio of Northwestern University in Illinois. "We're always trying to think about the first bit of a child's identity and so if we as a society pay a lot of attention to names it makes a lot of sense that people's names might influence how they think about themselves and the way in which people might think about them."

Plenty of research suggests the name chosen impacts a baby's life well into adulthood. For instance, donning your newborn boy with a girly sounding name could mean behavioral problems later in life. And [unique baby names](http://www.livescience.com/2668-popular-baby-names-change-dramatically.html) that only your child will have can be a hardship too.

A British study of 3,000 parents released in May suggests one-in-five parents regret the name they chose for a child, many of whom were distressed over the unusual or oddly spelled names they'd chosen. And even those who didn't explicitly regret the name choice admitted there were names they knew now they wished they'd chosen then, according to the study conducted by Bounty.com. [[List of history's most popular baby names](http://www.livescience.com/9842-popular-baby-names-history.html).

**Girly names**

Boys with names traditionally given to girls are more likely to misbehave than their counterparts with masculine names, research suggests.

When in elementary school, boys named Ashley and Shannon, for instance, behave just like their more masculine-named classmates named Brian and other boyish names.

"Once these kids hit sixth grade, all of a sudden the rates of disciplinary problems skyrocket [for those boys with girlish names], and it was much more the case if there happened to be a girl in the grade with that same name," Figlio told LiveScience.

Imagine, Figlio said, having to come face-to-face with your girly name every day when there's a girl in the classroom with a matching moniker. That suggests feelings of self-consciousness, which are perhaps magnified by teasing from others, play a role in the name-behavior link in this case.

Girls given boy names also see an effect. In a 2005 study, Figlio parsed out names by their phonemic sounds and then figured out their likelihood of belonging to a girl. For instance, the names Kayla and Isabella were so phonemically feminine their predicted probability of belonging to a girl was more than 100 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, Taylor, Madison and Alexis were phonemically predicted to be twice as likely to belong to boys than girls.

"I found girls with names that are relatively feminine in high school chose advanced coursework in humanities – and less feminine are more likely to [choose math and science](http://www.livescience.com/5482-girls-math-culture-skewed.html) courses," Figlio said, adding the research focused on high-achieving girls.

He can't say that one causes the other. Perhaps parents treat one daughter, Morgan, differently from an early age than they do her sister Elizabeth, whose name is much more feminine. “Did the parents choose that when they were choosing the name or did the name end up shaping their behavior toward their daughter?” Figlio said.

**Socioeconomic status and expectations**

Just as a person's accent or clothing can indicate something about that individual's background or character, so can a first name. And just like any other external indicator, names can lie.

Figlio got names from millions of birth certificates, and then broke down each name into more than a thousand phonemic components. He analyzed the names for letter combinations, complexity and other factors, and then used a statistical analysis to figure out the probability that the name belonged to someone of low socioeconomic status.

"Kids who have names [that] from a linguistic perspective are likely to be given by poorly educated parents, those kids ended up being treated differently," Figlio said. "They do worse in school and are less likely to be recommended for gifted [classes] and more likely to be classified as learning disabled."

He specifically looked at more unusual baby names, since with common names people have their individual experiences that can taint one's perspective of that name. Say you went to school with a jerk named George, you're likely to associate that name with negative qualities, regardless of how the name sounds linguistically.

To account for the idea that "dropout moms" might just give their babies poor-sounding names, Figlio included siblings from the same family with both high- and low-status sounding names. (Not all "poor-sounding" names were donned by kids of low socioeconomic status.)

**Meeting low expectations**

The link between a name and success later in life could have to do with these kids fulfilling others' expectations of them. Names that sound as though they came from a family of low socioeconomic status, might be tagged as less capable of achieving, for instance.

"People draw subconscious cues all the time about people. You meet a person for the first time and without thinking about it on an explicit level you're looking at the way they're walking, what their accent sounds like, how they're dressed, whether they smell … and you're developing these immediate reactions," Figlio said.

He added, "I think there's probably an [evolutionary reason behind that](http://www.livescience.com/3197-study-reveals-impressions-count.html). We're hardwired to try to figure out in a heartbeat whether or not we want to trust somebody, whether we want to run from somebody.”

Today, Figlio said to imagine a teacher on the first day of class looking over his or her roster and trying to figure out what to expect from a child. Plenty of teachers have told Figlio "I have to fight myself from doing this. I see this name … I think maybe they aren't going to have active parents."

And so the story continues. Children typically meet expectations, research has shown.

**Self-esteem**

Whether or not your name sounds upper class might not matter if you don’t like it. Accumulating research has shown a strong link between a person's like or dislike of his or her name and high and low self-esteem, respectively.

"The relationship is so strong that when people want to measure self-esteem in a more subtle way you can do it with the name-letter task," said Jean Twenge of San Diego State University, referring to a method in which subjects report whether they like different letters of the alphabet. Those with high self-esteem will say they like those letters in their names, particularly the first letter, she said.

It makes sense if you think about how much a part of a person a name really is.

"Our names really are wrapped up in our identity, and that might be why you get this somewhat surprising finding at least in some areas," Twenge said during a telephone interview. "People who particularly dislike their name and also if other people think it's an odd and unlikeable name, that can cause some problems. [They] tend not to be as well-adjusted."

**Unusual vs. common names**

When it's time to pick baby's name, there are two types of parents, those who want an unusual baby name and those who prefer a more common name donned by lots of kids.

Turns out, even if the particular name chosen doesn't make a difference in a child's success later in life, whether or not that name is common or unusual does matter.

The difference between choosing, say, one of five common, relatively likeable names is small in terms of any impact on the child’s life. "If you're choosing between a relatively likeable, common name and one that is really odd, that definitely could have an impact," Twenge said.

"Some of it ends up being a proxy for the parents' philosophy on life in general," Twenge said. "The parent who says 'I want my kid to be unique and stand out' and gives their kid a name that’s uncommon, probably will have a parenting style that emphasizes uniqueness and standing out."

She added, "So it ends up building on itself. The type of parent who would give a really unusual name is often going to parent differently from a parent who says 'I want to give my child a name so they fit in.'"

Twenge's recent research suggests parents are, in fact, [choosing more unusual baby names](http://www.livescience.com/9841-parents-choosing-unusual-baby-names.html) than decades ago.

Baby-naming advice books and blogs often suggest changing up the spelling of a common, or on-the-rise, name, in order to add some flare. Preliminary results from Figlio’s work suggest that may not be wise. Children with a deviant spelling of a common name tended to have slowed spelling and reading capabilities.

"That suggests a lot about internalizing," Figlio said. “You have the child named Jennifer spelled with a "G" – her teacher says 'Are you sure your name is spelled that way?' That can be incredibly hard on a person's confidence.”

All this parents end up realizing, as the Bounty study shows: One-fifth of parents in the British study wished they had chosen a name that was easier to spell; 8 percent were fed up with people being unable to pronounce the child’s name; and one in 10 thought the chosen name was clever at the time, but said the novelty had worn off.