

Inside People: For some, naming baby is an 'odd job'

by John Wilkens

Pat and Sheena Wheaton, a New Zealand couple, want to name their baby "4real," but government officials are balking. Too bad the Wheatons don't live in California.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? - Some of the more unusual names celebrities have given their children include Apple (Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin) Moon Unit (Frank and Gail Zappa) and, seen here, Dweezil, Moon Unit's brother. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin. "Basically, you can name your child anything you want," said Katie Schramm, an administrator in the San Diego County Recorder's office. (She said you'd believe her if you could see the names she's seen, but privacy laws prevent sharing them.)

The Wheatons want to use "4real" because it captures how they felt when an ultrasound test showed a little bundle of joy was on the way. Authorities say names that start with a number are against the rules. Negotiations are continuing.

Unusual names have been around forever. In 1600s England, a boy christened "If-Jesus-Had-Not-Died-For-Thee-Thou-Hadst-Been-Damned" grew up to be an economist who invented fire insurance. And preferred to be called Nicholas Barbon.

But it's not just your imagination if you think names are getting stranger, and parents more desperate. A recent Wall Street Journal story documented the "unprecedented level of angst" among parents using books, Web sites and paid consultants to find just the right appellation.

"What you are seeing (with the New Zealand case and others) is the fringe of a real transformation in how parents think about names, and the meaning of names," said Laura Wattenberg, the Boston-area author of "The Baby Name Wizard" (Broadway, \$13).

"First names used to signify connectedness, with your family or religion or culture. Increasingly today, they are more a matter of fashion, of uniqueness."

Some parents are so eager for a name that's unique, in fact, they wind up using Unique. Turns out it's not unique at all. According to federal records, Unique is the 980th most popular name given to girls in the United States so far this decade, used on average 170 times a year.

For real.

NEVAEH CAN WAIT

Heaven spelled backward didn't appear on the federal government's list of 1,000 most popular girls names until 2001, when it was ranked 266th.

Nevaeh has increased in popularity every year since, and was the 43rd most common name in the nation in 2006, with 5,814 families choosing it. In California, it was just the 81st most popular name (527 babies), sandwiched between Adriana and Briana.

WAS AC/DC ALREADY TAKEN?

A couple in Sweden ran afoul of name monitors earlier this year when they wanted to pay tribute to a favorite rock band by calling their daughter Metallica.

Officials there watch for names considered offensive, unsuitable or likely to "cause discomfort for the one using it." In the past they've also rejected Ikea, Veranda, and in one case involving parents protesting Swedish naming laws, a 43-character jumble of consonants and numbers.

In the end, the authorities decided to let the girl rock on and keep the name Metallica.

CASHING IN

Two years ago, parents of a newborn got \$15,000 for naming the child after an online casino. GoldenPalaceDotCom Silverman weighed in at 7 pounds, 10 ounces, and became at least the third child to carry the casino's moniker.

Known for its zany marketing antics, the casino paid a similar amount to a 33-year-old woman in Tennessee who agreed to change her name, too. The woman, formerly known as Terri, said she needed the money to support her five kids.

Casino executives quipped that GoldenPalaceDotCom is well on its way to "overtaking the name Smith in the telephone book."

INTERNATIONAL FLAVOR

Author Laura Wattenberg is working on a new book that includes a chapter on naming laws around the world. "It used to be extremely common for names to be regulated," she said.

Many countries - among them Portugal, France, Denmark and Germany - maintained lists of acceptable names, but in the last decade, "there's been a real movement toward naming freedom, as the world opens up and more parents are expecting the freedom they see in other places," she said.

In the past, names were rejected for religious reasons, or linguistic purity, or social welfare. "They feel like they are protecting the defenseless child," Wattenberg said. "If we won't let you drive without a car seat, why would we let you name your baby Satan?"

In the United States, because there are no lists of approved names, "generally you can get away with whatever you want," Wattenberg said. "Somebody has to bother to stop you."

There's not a lot of bothering in Venezuela, either. A recent New York Times story mentioned the "whimsically colorful tradition" of naming babies after Nixon or Stalin or Elvis or Darwin - even Hitler.

MOST UNUSUAL CELEBRITY NAMES

A British survey in 2004 identified these winners (and their parents):

1. Moon Unit (Frank and Gail Zappa)
2. Fifi Trixibelle (Paula Yates and Bob Geldof)
3. Satchel (Mia Farrow and Woody Allen)
4. Apple (Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin)
5. Daisy Boo (Julia and Jamie Oliver)
6. Rumer (Demi Moore and Bruce Willis)
7. Peaches (Yates and Geldof)
8. River (Arlyn and John Phoenix)

9. Rocco (Madonna and Guy Ritchie)

10. Nell Marmalade (Helen Baxendale and David Elliot)

Also rans: Maddox (Angelina Jolie); Dweezil, Moon Unit's brother; and Heavenly Hiraani Tiger Lily (another Yates creation, with Michael Hutchence).

FIVE MOST POPULAR NAMES IN U.S.

1906

Boys

1. John

2. William

3. James

4. George

5. Robert

Girls

1. Mary

2. Helen

3. Margaret

4. Anna

5. Ruth

1956

Boys

1. Michael

2. James

3. Robert

4. David

5. John

Girls

1. Mary

2. Debra

3. Linda

4. Deborah

5. Susan

2006

Boys

1. Jacob

2. Michael

3. Joshua

4. Ethan

5. Matthew

Girls

1. Emily

2. Emma

3. Madison

4. Isabella

5. Ava

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