

- Home
- News
- Technology
- Markets
- Personal Journal
- Opinion
- Leisure
- TODAY'S NEWSPAPER
- MY ONLINE JOURNAL
- MULTIMEDIA & EXTRAS
- MARKETS DATA & TOOLS
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The Baby-Name Business

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Parents are feeling intense pressure to pick names that set their kids apart. Some are even hiring consultants. Alexandra Alter on the art of 'branding' your newborn.

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By ALEXANDRA ALTER
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What's in a name?

Stress.

Sociologists and name researchers say they are seeing unprecedented levels of angst among parents trying to choose names for their children. As family names and old religious standbys continue to lose favor, parents are spending more time and money on the issue and are increasingly turning to strangers for help.



Isaac Brekken

Child's Play: John and Shannon Bentham used a consultant to help name their son, Jackson, now 12 weeks old.

Some parents are checking Social Security data to make sure their choices aren't too trendy, while others are fussing over every consonant like corporate branding experts. They're also pulling ideas from books, Web sites and software programs, and in some cases, hiring professional baby-name consultants

who use mathematical formulas.

Denise McCombie, 37, a California mother of two who's expecting a daughter this fall, spent \$475 to have a numerologist test her favorite name, Leah Marie, to see if it had positive associations. (It did.) This March, one nervous mom-to-be from Illinois listed her 16 favorite names on a tournament bracket and asked friends, family and people she met at baby showers to fill it out. The winner: Anna Irene.

Sean and Dawn Mistretta from Charlotte, N.C., tossed around possibilities for five months before they hired a pair of consultants -- baby-name book authors who draw up lists of suggestions for \$50. During a 30-minute conference call with Mrs. Mistretta, 34, a lawyer, and Mr. Mistretta, 35, a securities trader, the consultants discussed names based on their phonetic elements, popularity, and ethnic and linguistic origins -- then sent a 15-page list of possibilities. When their daughter was born in April, the Mistrettas settled on one of the consultants' suggestions -- Ava -- but only after taking one final straw poll of doctors and nurses at the hospital. While her family complimented the choice, Mrs.

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Mistretta says, "they think we're a little neurotic."

Karen Markovics, 36, who works for the planning department in Orange County, N.C., spent months reading baby books and scouring Web sites before settling on Nicole Josephine. But now, four years later, Mrs. Markovics says she wishes she'd chosen something less trendy -- and has even considered legally changing her daughter's name to Josephine Marie. "I'm having namer's remorse," she says.

Information Overload

The chief reason for the paralysis is too much information. About 80 baby-name books have been published in the last three years, according to Bowker, a publishing database -- compared with just 50 such titles between 1990 and 1996. More than 100 specialty Web sites have popped up offering everything from searchable databases and online snap polls to private consultations.

One site, [BabyNames.com](#), says it draws about 1.2 million unique visitors a month, a 50% increase in five years -- and 3,000 people have used its customized naming service, which provides 12 names for \$35. Just this month, the site began offering half-hour phone consulting sessions for \$95. "It's so overwhelming, it's hard to know where to start," says Patricia Martin of Williston, Vt., who is expecting a

Then there is the seismic influence of Google. When Julie Tiedens, 34, a high school teacher who lives near Eau Claire, Wis., typed her favorite name for a girl, Zoe Rose, into the search engine, she was forced to go back to the drawing board. The name was already taken -- by a name that was on the first page that came up," she says.

Celebrities (think Apple Martin, Shiloh Jolie-Pitt and Pilot Inspektor Riesgraf-Lee) are helping to drive up the pressure. And the growing brand consciousness among consumers has made parents more aware of how names can shape perceptions. The result: a child's name has become an emblem of individual taste more than a reflection of family traditions or cultural values. "We live in a marketing-oriented society," says Bruce Lansky, a former advertising executive and author of eight books on baby names, including "100,000 + Baby Names." "People who understand branding know that when you pick the right name, you're giving your child a head start."



Numerologist Joanne Ji with Denise McCombie and Ethan. Ms. McCombie evaluates a name -- Leah, due in October.

Academics say there's been a demonstrable shift in the way people name children. Census Bureau data show that the 10 most popular baby names were given to 23% of boys and 23% of girls. But in 2006, just 9.5% of boys and roughly 8% of girls were given the year's 10 most popular names -- a combined decline of about 33% from the average. Says Cleveland Kent Evans, an associate psychology professor at Bellevue University in Omaha, Neb. and a past president of the American Name Society. So while a once-ubiquitous name like Mary has fallen from No. 1 during most of the 1950s to No. 84 last year, many new names are taking off. Nevaeh (heaven spelled backward) ranked No. 43 among the 1,000 most popular names in the U.S. in 2006 and Zayden, another recent creation, was given to 224 boys.

"Names have become a matter of fashion and taste," says Harvard sociologist Steven Weber.

Not everyone is happy about this development. Albert Mehrabian, a professor of psychology at UCLA and author of "The Baby Name Report Card," has conducted research on how people react to different names. He found that more common names elicited positive responses, while unusual names typically brought negative responses. To him, giving children names that are too common or too unusual can be problematic.

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may ultimately be no different than sending them to school with their hair dyed have someone stand out by being bizarre, but that doesn't mean it's going to be

JOIN THE DISCUSSION



• Parents, weigh in: Did you struggle with the name game? [Share your thoughts in an online discussion.](#)

For Scott and Katie Keppler of Rye to seek help stemmed from a fundan With their second child on the way, an accountant, wanted something tr their first son's name, Liam. Her hus salesman, preferred unique names li

Jilly for a girl. "He was harassing me with some really strange names," Mrs. Ke

To break the deadlock, Mr. Keppler, 40, decided to spend \$25 for a service on B provides six options based on everything from a couple's mothers' maiden name: taste preferences (traditional, biblical, trendy, unique, ethnic and wild, among of son was born in March, they tapped their favorite name from the list: Max Phill was a truly impartial third-party, Mr. Keppler says. "It wasn't a grandmother, it

Madeline Dziallo, 36, a beautician and mother of two in LaGrange, Ill., turned to naming both of her children, Ross, 3, and Natalie, eight months. That consultan Korwitts, a self-described nameologist based in Downers Grove, Ill., charges up package including three half-hour phone calls and a personalized manual describi history, linguistic origins and personality traits. "She was an objective person fo about it with rather than driving my husband crazy," says Mrs. Dziallo.

Despite all of her planning, Mrs. Dziallo began to panic about the name Natalie t her due date. "I thought, 'I'm going to be calling her from the delivery room'," sl

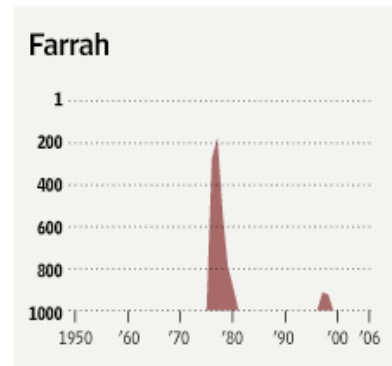
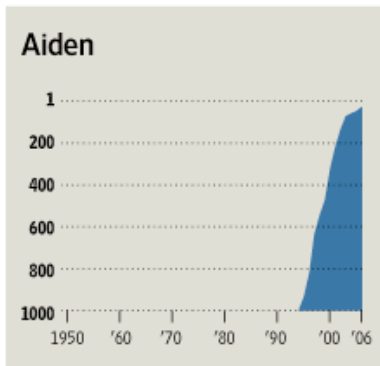
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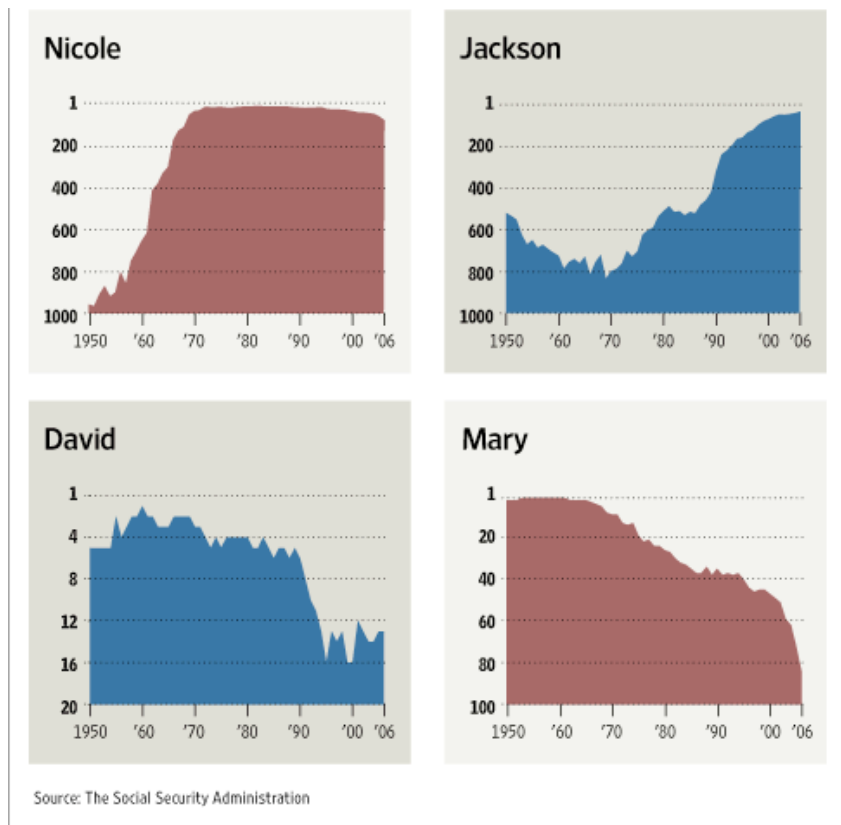
Lisa and Jon Stone of Lynnwood, Wash., turned to a name consultant because tl son to be "one of five Ashtons in the class," says Mrs. Stone, 36, a graphic desi Stone, 37, a production director for a nonprofit arts organization, the challenge v name that would help his son stand out. "An unusual name gets people's attentio searching for a job or you're one in a field of many," he says.

At first they considered a family name, Greene, but thought Greene Stone sound Age holistic product." Mr. Stone liked Finn Stone and Flynn Stone, but though much like the name of a cartoon family from the Stone Age. After reading throu; books, the Stones contacted Laura Wattenberg, author of "The Baby Name Wiza suggested they avoid names that ended in "s," given their last name, or names th phrases. Her recommendations: Evander as a top choice, with Levi and Vaughn c

Naming by Numbers

Here's a look at the popularity of six names in the U.S. since 1950. All but two are mapped by their rank from 1 to 1000 (No. 1 being most popular); Mary has been in the top 100 since 1950, while David has remained in the top 20.





of its "nice crisp syllables." They chose Beckett for their six-month-old son, a name they thought sounded reliable and stable.

"That C-K sound is very well regarded in corporate circles," Mr. Alper says, giving Coca-Cola as examples. "The hard stop forces you to accentuate the syllable in a way that draws attention to it."

Name choices have long been agonizing for some parents. In Colonial times, it was common for parents to open the Bible and select a word at random -- a practice that created the names Notwithstanding Griswold and Maybe Barnes. In some countries, name choices are controlled by government. France passed a law in the early 1800s that prohibited all names except those on a government-preapproved list; the last of these laws was repealed in 1993. In Germany, the government prohibits invented names and names that don't clearly designate a child's sex. Sweden and other countries prohibit names that officials think might subject a child to ridicule. Swedish authorities have banned names such as Veranda, Ikea and Metallica.

To capitalize on the confusion, baby-name consultants are opening for business. One is Jennifer Walker, 36, and Eric Reyes, 36 and 44, who are based in San Leandro, Calif., began their business when they had their first child in 2001. They chose the name Gabriel Rush Reyes for their son because of the vowel sounds and the way it flowed with the surname.

After hearing from other couples about their dilemmas, Ms. Walker saw an opportunity. When she was pregnant with her second child, she and her husband began writing a book that breaks down names according to their sounds and rhythms and explained how to break a surname into its phonetic parts and match it with a first name. After publishing "The Perfect Baby Name: The Name that Sounds Just Right" in 2005, the pair started offering name-consulting workshops, and have since helped two dozen couples choose names for \$50 apiece.

Last fall, John Bentham, 36, a Las Vegas theater producer, and his wife, Shannon, started a nonprofit foundation, says they felt "enormous pressure" to find a strong-sounding name for their son. "I wanted a name that would look good on a marquee or a political banner," Mrs. Bentham says.

Though they had agreed on the letter "j," none of the names they came up with - Jason, or John Jr. -- seemed original enough. They hired Ms. Walker and Mr. Re an 11-page list of possibilities, including Jackson. In March, the Benthams welcomed Dean into the world.

[Babynamesworld.com](http://babynamesworld.com), an online database, has drawn more than 5,000 requests in the last nine months, a 75% increase since the feature launched in 2005, says Web site's administrator and a self-described "name nerd." Many of the advice-se alternative spellings of popular names; those requests are fulfilled by 34 volunteers draws 600,000 visitors a day, up from 400,000 three years ago, says Ms. Conne

Mrs. Wattenberg, author of "The Baby Name Wizard," has carved out another niche Parents who like statistics. While searching for a name for her second child in 2 reference guides she could find were dictionaries. So Mrs. Wattenberg, a software database of thousands of names using Social Security data. She hand-coded each cultural associations and linguistic origins, noting how often a name appeared in operas or in the wedding or birth announcement sections of Ivy League alumni in daughters are named Eve and Nina.)

The program inspired her book, which spawned a Web site featuring the name-picker. Now that's given rise to a new baby-naming program called Nymbler, which generates similar names based on any name entered.

Some advisers could use a good fact-checker. A few baby-name Web sites, including babynamescountry.com, classify Strom as derived from the Greek word for bed, comes from the German word for stream. (The site's founder says names are subject are not researched.) On others, Megan is described as a derivation of the Greek word it actually originated in Wales as a pet form of Margaret.

Back to the Classics

Most observers say the parental anxiety -- and the current interest in unusual names continue to grow. Hitwise, an Internet-traffic research firm, says "baby names" was a generic Internet search term in 2006, the first year the company tracked such data alongside "weather," "directions" and "maps." Prof. Evans says he now gets regular couples asking him for advice. "Maybe I should be charging people," he says.

Others, citing the rising popularity of names like Sophie, Hannah, Violet and Emma return to the classics. This month, Julia Roberts, who was considered slightly rare twins Phinnaeus and Hazel, named her newborn son Henry.

As for Ms. Tiedens, who saw her top baby name choice usurped by a British poet adopted a baby boy and named him Jackson Thomas, a name that sailed through any complications. (Jackson was the 36th most popular boy name last year, as reported by the Security Administration.)

Still, she says she's not completely free from worry. "Now we just need to be careful other Jackson Thomases are going to do in 15 or 20 years," she says, "and what to put on their MySpace pages."

Write to Alexandra Alter at alexandra.alter@wsj.com

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