

I Have Baby Naming Writer's Block

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By Jessica Allen | December 2, 2013

When people ask why it took so long for my husband and me to get pregnant, I give the standard answers: career, finances, a Manhattan apartment the size of a clog. The truth is that Garrett and I couldn't agree on a name. Sure, Girl Baby or Joe Doe Baby might see the kid through middle school, yet it wouldn't work in college.

My name was supposed to be Samara, but my great-grandmother vetoed that idea. She didn't want me nicknamed Sam, which was the name of a brother she no longer spoke to. In retrospect she was probably jealous that Samara is pretty and her name, Gussie, was, uh, not. Name envy never really goes away. At any rate, my parents settled on Jessica, one of the most popular names the year I was born, and just about every year since.

Nevertheless, I understand my great-grandmother's concern: there's a whole host of people I'd rather not be reminded of each time I look at my kid. Ex-boyfriends, Garrett's ex-girlfriends, old bosses, a calculus teacher, that bank teller who was incredibly rude that one time. The older we get, the more names we can cross off the list based on life experiences alone.

I can't really discuss these issues with my dad, who wants me to name the kid after his parents. As it happens, his dad was called Yosef, but somehow that got changed to James at the hospital. So his whole life he went by both Jimmy and Yos. My grandma, Sara-no-h-thank-you-very-much, and I were very close, but she had name issues of her own.

Garrett was named for Pat Garrett, the Old West lawman and bartender. His dad wanted a cowboy theme for the whole brood, but his mom drew a line after their first son. Feminist to his core, Garrett has decided that our kid should have my last name, Allen, rather than his last name, Ziegler. Hyphenating wasn't on the table, nor was a portmanteau, a popular trend of combining names. We're not exactly sure how you would pronounce Allziellengler, and Jessarrett sounds like something you need to hire an exterminator to deal with. He likes ultra-feminine, almost Victorian names like Winnifred Sophronia. So badly does he want a girl that he refuses to discuss boy's names.

I'm the opposite. I find it much easier to pick boys names. Luckily, these days a ton of boys names have become girls names. I'm not talking about Ashley or Pat, the source of so many *Saturday Night Live* skits. I'm talking about Ryan, Addison, Sloan, Kyle, even Maxwell (thank you, Jessica Simpson).

Fashions change. When was the last time you met a Clarence under the age of 90? And yet that was one of the most popular names of the early 1900s. Not only does a friend's kid share the name of our childhood dog, but we had to rename our cat after our first niece was born.

We like the idea of naming our child after significant moments in our life together, such as where we met. Unfortunately, University of Washington–Seattle Allen would be a nightmare to fit on a driver's license. For a while, we talked about naming the kid after the place where it was conceived, which is allegedly what Ron Howard did (c.f., Bryce Dallas, as in the city, and Paige Carlyle, as in the hotel). We agreed, though, that Fallopian and Uterus would be tough to go through life with, especially if we have a boy.

However, the advantage of Uterus is the possibility of some pretty cool initials. I wasn't given a middle name, so my mom asked me to pick one as she was filling out paperwork to register me for kindergarten. I went with Sky, she added an "e" because it was the 1970s, and I magically became Jessica Skye Allen. I desperately wished that my first name had been Eunice, so my initials could have been USA. Back then, I was both patriotic and a bad speller.

Garrett and I know a kid whose initials are LOL. An unfortunate oversight on the part of otherwise very bright parents, or 21st-century cheekiness? Tough to tell. Not only do you have to consider initials, you also have to consider serial killers. Thank goodness for Google. Does your number-one choice also happen to be the name of a brutal dictator? Porn star? Creepy politician? Better to find out now, rather than when you're trying to get your kid registered with Social Security, lock down his/her Twitter handle, figure out how Google+ works, and sign up for a discrete Facebook URL.

Whatever we choose, we won't make the mistake my brother made when his wife was pregnant with their first. He told everyone the name they'd selected ahead of time: Vincent. Miraculously, at some point in the final few weeks, they remembered that Heather was about to give birth to an infant, not a middle-aged man in a wife-beater holding a sweaty Miller Light and a meatball sub. Our poor nephew Connor refuses to read any of the books dedicated to Vincent his parents received as shower gifts.

You can't be too careful about who you tell, or when. My stepsister shared her dream name with a friend. Now both have toddlers named Carson.

Few decisions are as fraught as picking a name. Some parents like to wait and see what the kid looks like before making a final determination. The fact that most infants look like old people no doubt explains the recent trend toward names like Ira, Ruth, and Cornelius, also known as people Gussie and Yos used to kibitz with.

Every parent falls into the same trap: we think the name is about the child, but it's always about us. Naming a kid gives parents the opportunity to show their aspirations, to honor their heritage, to demonstrate their coolness. We name the baby what we wish him to be, what we'd like her to have in life. It's the first time we get to exert our will on something that has a will of its own. Do we want dreamers or nudists? Try Rain and River. Major league hockey players? Go for Ivan and Sergei. Performers with cross-over appeal? There's Beyoncé and Justin, although it's probably best to stay away from Miley. Approximately nine bajillion websites exist to help us answer these very questions.

A few days ago I stopped to watch a gaggle of preschool kids, labeled with adorably outsized name tags. Jayden, Aidan, Mason, and Madison came first, followed by Ethan, Emma, Olivia, Kayla, Mia, Michael, Hector, and Eliza. Each has a future bigger than the proper noun selected by his or her parents. Plus, there wasn't a Jessica in the bunch. I went home and told Garrett that maybe we ought to consider "Junior."