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Your child's name could spell out the future

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What's in a name? Like genetic material, this parental bequest is profound. Yet unlike genes, parents play a deliberate role in the decision. Their choice of name can affect a child's life in strange ways.

Teachers, for example, weed out potential miscreants according to names which have been troublesome in the past. In the UK, Chelsea and Chardonnay are assumed to be in line for detention, while Elizabeth and Emma are presumed to be model pupils.

The Theory of Deadly Initials was a delightfully dubbed hypothesis which suggested a person's monogram could affect his or her life -expectancy. The research, conducted in 1999, found that people whose initials spelt words with positive connotations such as W.I.N or J.O.Y lived longer than average, while people whose initials spelt words with negative connotations such as D.I.E and P.I.G died younger. The difference was significant – 4.48 years plus and 2.8 years minus – but the theory was disproved in 2005.

Brett Pelham, a professor of psychology at the University at Buffalo in the US, has done a variety of work on what he calls "implicit egotism": the theory that people tend to prefer people, places or things that remind them of themselves.

He gives some examples on his website. People called Louis are particularly likely to live in St Louis, while people called Dennis, Denis, Denise and Dena are all particularly likely to be dentists. Besides home and job, the phenomenon stretches to love: Pelham has found that people are more likely to marry someone whose surname begins with the same letter as their own. Parents: decide your offspring's name with care, lest you condemn them to live in Wichita on a broom.

The act of naming was thought to be a solely human trait until 2006 when researchers discovered that dolphins identify each other using whistles. These signature sounds are the sonic equivalent of names, something distinctive used to denote an individual, which is reproducible and recognisable by others.

Despite all these potential pitfalls, I am sanguine about Astrid. My daughter's other possible name was Imogen. That was the stress test for Astrid just after she was born. Imogen had Shakespearean associations and dulcet syllables, but Google -results indicated it was also the choice for glamour models from Essex.

---- After seven-and-a-half months, she is not just called Astrid, she is Astrid. I cannot imagine her as anything else. I hope she feels the same way when she grows up.

If research is to be believed, she is set to become something starry: an astrologer or astronomer, even an astronaut perhaps. Although, if I really wanted her to go into space, I should have followed Frank Zappa's example and called her Moon Unit. Of course, she is free to change her name when she gets older.

Renaming has been a powerful act since Biblical times. A change in name often accompanies a change in standing. In the New Testament, for example, Simon is given the name Peter along with the keys of the kingdom of heaven. In recent times, renaming is often part of the path to celebrity. Robert Allen Zimmerman became Bob Dylan, Eric Arthur Blair became George Orwell, David Robert Hayward-Jones became David Bowie. People such as these call themselves what they aspire to become and in many cases it works.

Clearly name changes can be powerful. Just look at pilchards. These small oily fish were a woefully unpopular dish until they became Cornish sardines. Sales boomed overnight. You would, I venture, be a different person by any other name.

Tolerance is one of those qualities many people aspire to, but it tends to be thought of as a binary proposition: people are either tolerant or intolerant. Recently I have come to realise that tolerance is finite. It is used up over a day. It can only be replenished by

Let me give you an example. My capacity to tolerate Astrid scampering away while I am trying to put her nappy on changes according to my level of fatigue. It can range from funny and cute to irritating and annoying, depending on how depleted my stock of tolerance is.

This approach helps deal with all sorts of inconsistencies. If something irks me today when it did not yesterday, I try to consciously and artificially increase my tolerance. Although in truth I know there is only one real remedy: sleep.

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