

The Last Word

HELLO

my name is

~~LISA Thomas~~ Sanders

LISA Thomas - Sanders

on Last Names

You've spent hours poring over baby name books, making lists and trying out first and middle names to see how they sound together. But what about your baby's last name?

By **Brette McWhorter Sember**

There are a lot of options available to you that you might never have considered. Most babies are given their father's last name because that's considered the norm in our society, but you're under no obligation to use that name, and there are many other choices that might work for you and your family.

When parents are married, they usually decide together about what last name their baby will have, but when the parents aren't married, there can be some disagreement. In most states there are no rules about this, but in Florida if the parents can't agree, the baby receives both parents' names hyphenated and in alphabetical order. If you and your partner are unmarried, the mother is usually the one who has final say about the last name, but when you're married, it's a decision you need to make together. And you're not obligated to use any specific last name for your baby. You can even make one up if you want.

Many parents choose to give their child the mother's last name. South Portland, ME couple Elizabeth Edwardsen and Tim Beidel decided to give their daughter Harriet her mom's last name. "I didn't have any relatives left named Edwardsen," Edwardsen says. "I also thought it would give her an early dose of feminism to be breaking away from the whole paternal name tradition. My husband agreed, mostly because he has to spell his name every time he says it to anyone and his name is routinely mispronounced. Harriet's middle name, Lilah, was the name of her paternal great-grandmother. I guess I hoped that would make his parents feel a little bit better about the fact that their

Cathy Burke Ondrak of Centennial, CO, is pregnant and is tentatively planning to give her baby the first name Burke. "I had a really hard time changing my name when I got married," she says. But the biggest reason for the choice is her father. "He had no boys, so his name will not be carried on. I think it is a great way to honor him and continue to remember him."

Combining Names

Hyphenating the last name is a way to give your baby both of your last names. Belle Wong of Pickering, Ontario and her husband Ward Jardine chose to name their baby Dylan Jardine-Wong. Wong says, "I have some ambivalence about it. What if

he marries a woman with a double last name too? If the whole thing gets to be too much for him, I feel totally open to his dropping the Wong when he gets older."

But the decision to include her name was important to her. She says, "Because I'm Chinese, it's nice that Dylan's heritage is reflected in his last name. I guess Dylan's name reflects the relationship Ward and I have. We are

equal partners, and there are no strong gender roles in our marriage. I know that normally it would have been Wong-Jardine, but we both just liked the sound of Jardine-Wong better."

She also finds that people have difficulty understanding. "We seem to have to explain it all the time," Wong says. "I know Ward's family thinks it's rather bizarre. When we call the doctor's office for an appointment you can hear the confusion in their voices. Ward always sticks the hyphen in when he calls. He will say 'Jardine hyphen Wong.'"

Another option is to give your baby two last names. Jeannette Moninger

and her husband David Spurlin from Greenwood, IN, did just that when they named their twin sons Chance Garey Moninger Spurlin and Campbell Martin Moninger Spurlin. They gave each child the maiden name of one of the grandmothers. "Thankfully, both of these surnames are also first names, so it's not like the kid's middle name was Paczewski or something," says Moninger.

They considered hyphenating their last names for the children but felt "It was just too long and confusing to everyone," Moninger says. So they opted to give them two last names, with their father's name last. "I was content just knowing that Moninger was on the birth certificates and their Social Security cards. Keeping the Moninger name in some form in my children's names was important to me because they are, after all, half Moningers. There are three Moninger men in my family who can carry on the Moninger name, but so far none of them are married. I felt like I was doing my part to ensure that the Moninger name didn't completely die out. My grandmother is 96. I think she also felt honored that the boys are carrying on the Moninger name, even if it's just on paper."

Because the boys are only 3, Moninger and Spurlin have not explained to them that they have two last names and so far have only taught them the last name Spurlin. Moninger also has not explained to the boys that her last name is not Spurlin. She says, "I figure it's something I can correct later, when they're older and can understand the reasons."

New Family Names

Some parents decide on a non-traditional family name that everyone in the family can share. Denver, CO parents Susanna and Mark Donato chose to use Susanna's surname for their family and for themselves. Mark's given last name is Ritchey. "When we married, I wanted to keep my name," Susanna Donato says. "Mark wasn't particularly attached to his name, and his family has a variety of names from divorce, changing names and so on, so he said he would rather our eventual family all have one last name."

When their daughter was born, they named her Lydia Grace Ritchey Donato, intending that she would have both

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name wasn't going on the new baby!" While the decision was the right one for her, Edwardsen wasn't fully prepared for the confusion it would cause. "Her classmates' parents sometimes think Tim is not her father. I've been asked more than once if he adopted her," she says. "Also, we confused the census person who called back twice to make sure she wasn't adopted by Tim. Every once in a while we run into some person who is obviously offended by the fact that we did this, like we've violated an important rule."

Some parents choose to use the mother's last name as the child's first or middle name so that it can be carried on in some way.

Ritchey and Donato as last names. "The biggest problems are the logistics," Donato says. "For instance, Lydia's four names are on her Social Security card. But when we file taxes each year, the program usually kicks it back to tell us the IRS has a different last name, meaning that both last names don't match her Social Security number. They have only her last name."

Other people have had some trouble understanding the family name as well. "Grandparents still send us mail addressed to the Donato-Ritchey family. But new people, schools, etc, know us as the Donato family. Usually people just say, 'Oh, how liberated.' Women tend to think it's cool," Donato says. She doesn't know if she would be so insistent on keeping her own name if she had to do it all again, but says, "I think it's easier for us to have one family name, so, things being what they are, I'm glad my husband did what he did."

Other families choose a name that is completely new to both of them. Michael and Rebecca Rohan of Buffalo, NY did this. Her last name was Carey, and his was Rook. She didn't want to change her name when they married and thought about hyphenating for a while before deciding it wasn't for her. Then when she got preg-

nant with her first child, "We met another couple who were expecting their first baby and were finalizing their forms to change their last name," she says. "I had never considered this option before, and I decided this was what we should do. I didn't want my kids to have a different last name from me, but I still wasn't comfortable changing my name to my husband's." Her husband finally picked a name that they were both comfortable with, and they went through a simple court procedure to legally change their names. Then they were able to use that name on their child's birth certificate.

The reaction from family was generally negative, but despite that, Rohan says, "I feel good about it. I enjoy having our new identity. I feel like we're forging a new path together." However, she has one regret: "Looking back, I wish we had chosen a name from one of our family trees."

Choosing a baby's last name requires as much thought as a first name, and with the wide variety of options available, you can find a name that works for you. 🍀

About the author: Brette McWhorter Sember is a mother of two, a former attorney and the author of 12 books.

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"I'm not sure about other states, but in Alaska, you can change a Child's name once in their life without paying a fee. The lady I knew originally gave her child her last name, but then when she was about 1 year old she changed it and hyphenated the dad's last name onto it. She decided the child was both of theirs, and since it was unknown whether or not they would marry, she wanted Isabell to feel a part of both of their families... She felt that Isabell's dad was a good dad, she doesn't think he is going anywhere, so she didn't feel bad about giving her his last name as well."

— kaydencesmama



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