Chapter 6

PERFECT PARENTING, PART II; OR: WOULD A ROSHANDA BY ANY OTHER NAME SMELL AS SWEET?

Obsessive or not, any parent *wants* to believe that she is making a big difference in the kind of person her child turns out to be. Otherwise, why bother?

The belief in parental power is manifest in the first official act a parent commits: giving the baby a name. As any modern parent knows, the baby-naming industry is booming, as evidenced by a proliferation of books, websites, and baby-name consultants. Many parents seem to believe that a child cannot prosper unless it is hitched to the right name; names are seen to carry great aesthetic or even predictive powers.

This might explain why, in 1958, a New York City man named Robert Lane decided to call his baby son Winner. The Lanes, who lived in a housing project in Harlem, already had several children, each with a fairly typical name. But this boy—well, Robert Lane apparently had a special feeling about this one. Winner Lane: how could he fail with a name like that?

Three years later, the Lanes had another baby boy, their seventh and last child. For reasons that no one can quite pin down today, Robert decided to name this boy Loser. It doesn't appear that Robert was unhappy about the new baby; he just seemed to get a kick out of the name's bookend effect. First a Winner, now a Loser. But if Winner Lane could hardly be expected to fail, could Loser Lane possibly succeed?

Loser Lane did in fact succeed. He went to prep school on a scholarship, graduated from Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, and joined the New York Police Department (this was his mother's longtime wish), where he made detective and, eventually, sergeant. Although he never hid his name, many people were uncomfortable using it. "So I have a bunch of names," he says today, "from Jimmy to James to whatever they want to call you. Timmy. But they rarely call you Loser." Once in a while, he said, "they throw a French twist on it: 'Losier.' " To his police colleagues, he is known as Lou.

And what of his brother with the can't-miss name? The most noteworthy achievement of Winner Lane, now in his midforties, is the sheer length of his criminal record: nearly three dozen arrests for burglary, domestic violence, trespassing, resisting arrest, and other mayhem.

These days, Loser and Winner barely speak. The father who named them is no longer alive. Clearly he had the right idea—that naming is destiny—but he must have gotten the boys mixed up.

Then there is the recent case of Temptress, a fifteen-year-old girl whose misdeeds landed her in Albany County Family Court in New York. The judge, W. Dennis Duggan, had long taken note of the strange names borne by some offenders. One teenage

boy, Amcher, had been named for the first thing his parents saw upon reaching the hospital: the sign for Albany Medical Center Hospital Emergency Room. But Duggan considered Temptress the most outrageous name he had come across.

"I sent her out of the courtroom so I could talk to her mother about why she named her daughter Temptress," the judge later recalled. "She said she was watching *The Cosby Show* and liked the young actress. I told her the actress's name was actually *Tempestt* Bledsoe. She said she found that out later, that they had misspelled the name. I asked her if she knew what 'temptress' meant, and she said she also found that out at some later point. Her daughter was charged with ungovernable behavior, which included bringing men into the home while the mother was at work. I asked the mother if she had ever thought the daughter was living out her name. Most all of this went completely over her head."

Was Temptress actually "living out her name," as Judge Duggan saw it? Or would she have wound up in trouble even if her mother had called her Chastity? *

It isn't much of a stretch to assume that Temptress didn't have ideal parents. Not only was her mother willing to name her Temptress in the first place, but she wasn't smart enough to know what that word even meant. Nor is it so surprising, on some level, that a boy named Amcher would end up in family court. People who can't be bothered to come up with a name for their child aren't likely to be the best parents either.

So does the name you give your child affect his life? Or is it *your* life reflected in his name? In either case, what kind of signal does a child's name send to the world—and most important, does it really matter?

* See footnote, p. 290.

• • •

As it happens, Loser and Winner, Temptress and Amcher were all black. Is this fact merely a curiosity or does it have something larger to say about names and culture?

Every generation seems to produce a few marquee academics who advance the thinking on black culture. Roland G. Fryer Jr., the young black economist who analyzed the "acting white" phenomenon and the black-white test score gap, may be among the next. His ascension has been unlikely. An indifferent high-school student from an unstable family, he went to the University of Texas at Arlington on an athletic scholarship. Two things happened to him during college: he quickly realized he would never make the NFL or the NBA; and, taking his studies seriously for the first time in his life, he found he liked them. After graduate work at Penn State and the University of Chicago, he was hired as a Harvard professor at age twenty-five. His reputation for candid thinking on race was already well established.

Fryer's mission is the study of black underachievement. "One could rattle off all the statistics about blacks not doing so well," he says. "You can look at the black-white differential in out-of-wedlock births or infant mortality or life expectancy. Blacks are the worst-performing ethnic group on SATs. Blacks earn less than whites. They are still just not doing well, period. I basically want to figure out where blacks went wrong, and I want to devote my life to this."

In addition to economic and social disparity between blacks and whites, Fryer had become intrigued by the virtual segregation of culture. Blacks and whites watch different television shows. (*Monday Night Football* is the only show that typically appears on each group's top ten list; *Seinfeld*, one of the most popular sitcoms in history, never ranked in the top fifty among blacks.) They smoke different cigarettes. (Newports enjoy a 75 percent market share among black teenagers versus 12 percent among whites; the white teenagers are mainly smoking Marlboros.) And black parents give their children names that are starkly different from white children's.

Fryer came to wonder: is distinctive black culture a *cause* of the economic disparity between blacks and whites or merely a reflection of it?

As with the ECLS study, Fryer went looking for the answer in a mountain of data: birth-certificate information for every child born in California since 1961. The data, covering more than sixteen million births, included standard items such as name, gender, race, birthweight, and the parents' marital status, as well as more telling factors about the parents: their zip code (which indicates socioeconomic status and a neighborhood's racial composition), their means of paying the hospital bill (again, an economic indicator), and their level of education.

The California data prove just how dissimilarly black and white parents name their children. White and Asian-American parents, meanwhile, give their children remarkably similar names; there is some disparity between white and Hispanic-American parents, but it is slim compared to the black-white naming gap.

The data also show the black-white gap to be a recent phenomenon. Until the early 1970s, there was a great overlap between black and white names. The typical baby girl born in a black neighborhood in 1970 was given a name that was twice as common among blacks as whites. By 1980 she received a name

that was *twenty* times more common among blacks. (Boys' names moved in the same direction but less aggressively—probably because parents of all races are less adventurous with boys' names than with girls'.) Given the location and timing of this change—dense urban areas where Afro-American activism was gathering strength—the most likely cause of the explosion in distinctively black names was the Black Power movement, which sought to accentuate African culture and fight claims of black inferiority. If this naming revolution was indeed inspired by Black Power, it would be one of the movement's most enduring remnants. Afros today are rare, dashikis even rarer; Black Panther founder Bobby Seale is best known today for peddling a line of barbecue products.

A great many black names today are unique to blacks. More than 40 percent of the black girls born in California in a given year receive a name that not *one* of the roughly 100,000 baby white girls received that year. Even more remarkably, nearly 30 percent of the black girls are given a name that is unique among the names of every baby, white and black, born that year in California. (There were also 228 babies named Unique during the 1990s alone, and 1 each of Uneek, Uneque, and Uneqqee.) Even among very popular black names, there is little overlap with whites. Of the 626 baby girls named Deja in the 1990s, 591 were black. Of the 454 girls named Precious, 431 were black. Of the 318 Shanices, 310 were black.

What kind of parent is most likely to give a child such a distinctively black name? The data offer a clear answer: an unmarried, low-income, undereducated teenage mother from a black neighborhood who has a distinctively black name herself. In

Fryer's view, giving a child a superblack name is a black parent's signal of solidarity with the community. "If I start naming my kid Madison," he says, "you might think, 'Oh, you want to go live across the railroad tracks, don't you?' " If black kids who study calculus and ballet are thought to be "acting white," Fryer says, then mothers who call their babies Shanice are simply "acting black."

The California study shows that many white parents send as strong a signal in the opposite direction. More than 40 percent of the white babies are given names that are at least four times more common among whites. Consider Connor and Cody, Emily and Abigail. In one recent ten-year stretch, each of these names was given to at least two thousand babies in California—fewer than 2 percent of them black.

So what are the "whitest" names and the "blackest" names?

THE TWENTY "WHITEST" GIRL NAMES

1. **Molly**	6. **Madeline**	11. **Jenna**	16. **Holly**
2. **Amy**	7. **Katelyn**	12. **Heather**	17. **Allison**
3. **Claire**	8. **Emma**	13. **Katherine**	18. **Kaitlyn**
4. **Emily**	9. **Abigail**	14. **Caitlin**	19. **Hannah**
5. **Katie**	10. **Carly**	15. **Kaitlin**	20. **Kathryn**

THE TWENTY "BLACKEST" GIRL NAMES

1. Imani	6. Nia	11. Jada	16. Jasmin
2. Ebony	7. Deja	12. Tierra	17. Jazmin
3. Shanice	8. Diamond	13. Tiara	18. Jasmine
4. Aaliyah	9. Asia	14. Kiara	19. Alexus
5. Precious	10. Aliyah	15. Jazmine	20. Raven

THE TWENTY "WHITEST" BOY NAMES

1. Jake	6. Dustin	11. Cole	16. Dylan
2. Connor	7. Luke	12. Lucas	17. Maxwell
3. Tanner	8. Jack	13. Bradley	18. Hunter
4. Wyatt	9. Scott	14. Jacob	19. Brett
5. Cody	10. Logan	15. Garrett	20. Colin

THE TWENTY "BLACKEST" BOY NAMES

1. DeShawn	6. Malik	11. Demetrius	16. Darius
2. DeAndre	7. Trevon	12. Reginald	17. Xavier
3. Marquis	8. Tyrone	13. Jamal	18. Terrance
4. Darnell	9. Willie	14. Maurice	19. Andre
5. Terrell	10. Dominique	15. Jalen	20. Darryl

So how does it matter if you have a very white name or a very black name? Over the years, a series of "audit studies" have tried to measure how people perceive different names. In a typical audit study, a researcher would send two identical (and fake) résumés, one with a traditionally white name and the other with an immigrant or minority-sounding name, to potential employers. The "white" résumés have always gleaned more job interviews.

According to such a study, if DeShawn Williams and Jake Williams sent identical résumés to the same employer, Jake Williams would be more likely to get a callback. The implication is that black-sounding names carry an economic penalty. Such studies are tantalizing but severely limited, for they can't explain *why* DeShawn didn't get the call. Was he rejected because the employer is a racist and is convinced that DeShawn Williams is black? Or did he reject him because "DeShawn" sounds like someone from a low-income, low-education family? A résumé is a fairly undependable set of clues—a recent study showed that more than 50 percent of them contain lies—so "DeShawn" may simply signal a disadvantaged background to an employer who believes that workers from such backgrounds are undependable.

Nor do the black-white audit studies predict what might have happened in a job interview. What if the employer *is* racist, and if he unwittingly agreed to interview a black person who happened to have a white-sounding name—would he be any more likely to hire the black applicant after meeting face-to-face? Or is the interview a painful and discouraging waste of time for the black applicant—that is, an economic penalty for having a *white*-sounding name? Along those same lines, perhaps a black person with a white name pays an economic penalty in the *black* community; and what of the potential *advantage* to be gained in the black

community by having a distinctively black name? But because the audit studies can't measure the actual life outcomes of the fictitious DeShawn Williams versus Jake Williams, they can't assess the broader impact of a distinctively black name.

Maybe DeShawn should just change his name.

People do this all the time, of course. The clerks in New York City's civil court recently reported that name changes are at an all-time high. Some of the changes are purely, if bizarrely, aesthetic. A young couple named Natalie Jeremijenko and Dalton Conley recently renamed their four-year-old son Yo Xing Heyno Augustus Eisner Alexander Weiser Knuckles Jeremijenko-Conley. Some people change names for economic purposes: after a New York livery-cab driver named Michael Goldberg was shot in early 2004, it was reported that Mr. Goldberg was in fact an Indian-born Sikh who thought it advantageous to take a Jewish name upon immigrating to New York. Goldberg's decision might have puzzled some people in show business circles, where it is a time-honored tradition to change Jewish names. Thus did Issur Danielovitch become Kirk Douglas; thus did the William Morris Agency rise to prominence under its namesake, the former Zelman Moses.

The question is, would Zelman Moses have done as well had he not become William Morris? And would DeShawn Williams do any better if he called himself Jake Williams or Connor Williams? It is tempting to think so—just as it is tempting to think that a truckload of children's books will make a child smarter.

Though the audit studies can't be used to truly measure how much a name matters, the California names data can.

How? The California data included not only each baby's vital statistics but information about the mother's level of education, in-

come, and, most significantly, her own date of birth. This last fact made it possible to identify the hundreds of thousands of California mothers who had themselves been born in California and then to link them to their *own* birth records. Now a new and extremely potent story emerged from the data: it was possible to track the life outcome of any individual woman. This is the sort of data chain that researchers dream about, making it possible to identify a set of children who were born under similar circumstances, then locate them again twenty or thirty years later to see how they turned out. Among the hundreds of thousands of such women in the California data, many bore distinctively black names and many others did not. Using regression analysis to control for other factors that might influence life trajectories, it was then possible to measure the impact of a single factor—in this case, a woman's first name—on her educational, income, and health outcomes.

So does a name matter?

The data show that, on average, a person with a distinctively black name—whether it is a woman named Imani or a man named DeShawn—*does* have a worse life outcome than a woman named Molly or a man named Jake. But it isn't the fault of their names. If two black boys, Jake Williams and DeShawn Williams, are born in the same neighborhood and into the same familial and economic circumstances, they would likely have similar life outcomes. But the kind of parents who name their son Jake *don't* tend to live in the same neighborhoods or share economic circumstances with the kind of parents who name their son DeShawn. And that's why, on average, a boy named Jake will tend to earn more money and get more education than a boy named DeShawn. A DeShawn is more likely to have been handicapped by a low-income, low-education, single-parent background. His

name is an indicator—not a cause—of his outcome. Just as a child with no books in his home isn't likely to test well in school, a boy named DeShawn isn't likely to do as well in life.

And what if DeShawn *had* changed his name to Jake or Connor: would his situation improve? Here's a guess: anybody who bothers to change his name in the name of economic success is—like the high-school freshmen in Chicago who entered the school-choice lottery—at least highly motivated, and motivation is probably a stronger indicator of success than, well, a name.

Just as the ECLS data answered questions about parenting that went well beyond the black-white test gap, the California names data tell a lot of stories in addition to the one about distinctively black names. Broadly speaking, the data tell us how parents see themselves—and, more significantly, what kind of expectations they have for their children.

Here's a question to begin with: where does a name come from, anyway? Not, that is, the actual source of the name—that much is usually obvious: there's the Bible, there's the huge cluster of traditional English and Germanic and Italian and French names, there are princess names and hippie names, nostalgic names and place names. Increasingly, there are brand names (Lexus, Armani, Bacardi, Timberland) and what might be called aspirational names. The California data show eight Harvards born during the 1990s (all of them black), fifteen Yales (all white), and eighteen Princetons (all black). There were no Doctors but three Lawyers (all black), nine Judges (eight of them white), three Senators (all white), and two Presidents (both black). Then there are the invented names. Roland G. Fryer Jr., while discussing his names

research on a radio show, took a call from a black woman who was upset with the name just given to her baby niece. It was pronounced *shuh-TEED* but was in fact spelled "Shithead." *

Shithead has yet to catch on among the masses, but other names do. How does a name migrate through the population, and why? Is it purely a matter of zeitgeist, or is there some sensible explanation? We all know that names rise and fall and rise—witness the return of Sophie and Max from near extinction—but is there a discernible pattern to these movements?

The answer lies in the California data, and the answer is yes.

Among the most interesting revelations in the data is the correlation between a baby's name and the parents' socioeconomic status. Consider the most common female names found in middle-income white households versus low-income white households. (These and other lists to follow include data from the 1990s alone, to ensure a large sample that is also current.)

MOST COMMON MIDDLE-INCOME WHITE GIRL NAMES

1. **Sarah**	6. **Amanda**	11. **Nicole**	16. **Jennifer**
2. **Emily**	7. **Megan**	12. **Taylor**	17. **Alexandra**
3. **Jessica**	8. **Samantha**	13. **Elizabeth**	18. **Brittany**
4. **Lauren**	9. **Hannah**	14. **Katherine**	19. **Danielle**
5. **Ashley**	10. **Rachel**	15. **Madison**	20. **Rebecca**

* See note, p. 289.

MOST COMMON LOW-INCOME WHITE GIRL NAMES

1. **Ashley**	6. **Sarah**	11. **Emily**	16. **Stephanie**
2. **Jessica**	7. **Kayla**	12. **Nicole**	17. **Jennifer**
3. **Amanda**	8. **Amber**	13. **Elizabeth**	18. **Hannah**
4. **Samantha**	9. **Megan**	14. **Heather**	19. **Courtney**
5. **Brittany**	10. **Taylor**	15. **Alyssa**	20. **Rebecca**

There is considerable overlap, to be sure. But keep in mind that these are the most common names of all, and consider the size of the data set. The difference between consecutive positions on these lists may represent several hundred or even several thousand children. So if Brittany is number five on the low-income list and number eighteen on the middle-income list, you can be assured that Brittany is a decidedly low-end name. Other examples are even more pronounced. Five names in each category don't appear at all in the other category's top twenty. Here are the top five names among high-end and low-end families, in order of their relative disparity with the other category:

MOST COMMON HIGH-END WHITE GIRL NAMES

1. **Alexandra**	4. **Madison**
2. **Lauren**	5. **Rachel**
3. **Katherine**	

MOST COMMON LOW-END WHITE GIRL NAMES

1. **Amber**	4. **Stephanie**
2. **Heather**	5. **Alyssa**
3. **Kayla**	

And for the boys:

MOST COMMON HIGH-END WHITE BOY NAMES

1. **Benjamin**	4. **Alexander**
2. **Samuel**	5. **Andrew**
3. **Jonathan**	

MOST COMMON LOW-END WHITE BOY NAMES

1. **Cody**	4. **Justin**
2. **Brandon**	5. **Robert**
3. **Anthony**	

Considering the relationship between income and names, and given the fact that income and *education* are strongly correlated, it is not surprising to find a similarly strong link between the parents' level of education and the name they give their baby. Once again drawing from the pool of most common names among white children, here are the top picks of highly educated parents versus those with the least education:

MOST COMMON WHITE GIRL NAMES AMONG HIGH-EDUCATION PARENTS

1. Katherine
2. Emma
3. Alexandra
4. Julia
5. Rachel

MOST COMMON WHITE GIRL NAMES AMONG LOW-EDUCATION PARENTS

1. Kayla
2. Amber
3. Heather
4. Brittany
5. Brianna

MOST COMMON WHITE BOY NAMES AMONG HIGH-EDUCATION PARENTS

1. Benjamin
2. Samuel
3. Alexander
4. John
5. William

MOST COMMON WHITE BOY NAMES AMONG LOW-EDUCATION PARENTS

1. Cody
2. Travis
3. Brandon
4. Justin
5. Tyler

The effect is even more pronounced when the sample is widened beyond the most common names. Drawing from the entire California database, here are the names that signify the most poorly educated white parents.

THE TWENTY WHITE GIRL NAMES THAT BEST SIGNIFY LOW-EDUCATION PARENTS *

(AVERAGE NUMBER OF YEARS OF MOTHER'S EDUCATION IN PARENTHESES)

1.	Angel	(11.38)	11.	Jazmine	(11.94)
2.	Heaven	(11.46)	12.	Shyanne	(11.96)
3.	Misty	(11.61)	13.	Britany	(12.05)
4.	Destiny	(11.66)	14.	Mercedes	(12.06)
5.	Brenda	(11.71)	15.	Tiffanie	(12.08)
6.	Tabatha	(11.81)	16.	Ashly	(12.11)
7.	Bobbie	(11.87)	17.	Tonya	(12.13)
8.	Brandy	(11.89)	18.	Crystal	(12.15)
9.	Destinee	(11.91)	19.	Brandie	(12.16)
10.	Cindy	(11.92)	20.	Brandi	(12.17)

* WITH A MINIMUM OF 100 OCCURRENCES.

If you or someone you love is named Cindy or Brenda and is over, say, forty, and feels that those names did not formerly connote a low-education family, you are right. These names, like many others, have shifted hard and fast of late. Some of the other low-education names are obviously misspellings, whether intentional or not, of more standard names. In most cases the standard spellings of the names—Tabitha, Cheyenne, Tiffany, Brittany, and Jasmine—also signify low education. But the various spellings of even one name can reveal a strong disparity:

TEN "JASMINES" IN ASCENDING ORDER OF MATERNAL EDUCATION

(YEARS OF MOTHER'S EDUCATION IN PARENTHESES)

1.	Jazmine	(11.94)	6.	Jasmina	(12.50)
2.	Jazmyne	(12.08)	7.	Jazmyn	(12.77)
3.	Jazzmin	(12.14)	8.	Jasmine	(12.88)
4.	Jazzmine	(12.16)	9.	Jasmin	(13.12)
5.	Jasmyne	(12.18)	10.	Jasmyn	(13.23)

Here is the list of low-education white boy names. It includes the occasional misspelling (Micheal and Tylor), but more common is the nickname-as-proper-name trend.

THE TWENTY WHITE BOY NAMES THAT BEST SIGNIFY LOW-EDUCATION PARENTS*

(YEARS OF MOTHER'S EDUCATION IN PARENTHESES)

1.	Ricky	(11.55)	11.	Tommy	(11.89)
2.	Joey	(11.65)	12.	Tony	(11.96)
3.	Jessie	(11.66)	13.	Micheal	(11.98)
4.	Jimmy	(11.66)	14.	Ronnie	(12.03)
5.	Billy	(11.69)	15.	Randy	(12.07)
6.	Bobby	(11.74)	16.	Jerry	(12.08)
7.	Johnny	(11.75)	17.	Tylor	(12.14)
8.	Larry	(11.80)	18.	Terry	(12.15)
9.	Edgar	(11.81)	19.	Danny	(12.17)
10.	Steve	(11.84)	20.	Harley	(12.22)

* WITH A MINIMUM OF 100 OCCURRENCES

Now for the names that signify the *highest* level of parental education. These names don't have much in common, phonetically or aesthetically, with the low-education names. The girls' names are in most regards diverse, though with a fair share of literary and otherwise artful touches. A caution to prospective parents who are shopping for a "smart" name: remember that such a name won't *make* your child smart; it will, however, give her the same name as other smart kids—at least for a while. (For a much longer and more varied list of girls' and boys' names, see pp. 290–293.)

THE TWENTY WHITE GIRL NAMES THAT BEST SIGNIFY HIGH-EDUCATION PARENTS*

(YEARS OF MOTHER'S EDUCATION IN PARENTHESES)

1.	Lucienne	(16.60)	11.	Rotem	(16.08)
2.	Marie-Claire	(16.50)	12.	Oona	(16.00)
3.	Glynnis	(16.40)	13.	Atara	(16.00)
4.	Adair	(16.36)	14.	Linden	(15.94)
5.	Meira	(16.27)	15.	Waverly	(15.93)
6.	Beatrix	(16.26)	16.	Zofia	(15.88)
7.	Clementine	(16.23)	17.	Pascale	(15.82)
8.	Philippa	(16.21)	18.	Eleanora	(15.80)
9.	Aviva	(16.18)	19.	Elika	(15.80)
10.	Flannery	(16.10)	20.	Neeka	(15.77)

* WITH A MINIMUM OF 10 OCCURRENCES

Now for the boys' names that are turning up these days in high-education households. This list is particularly heavy on the Hebrew, with a noticeable trend toward Irish traditionalism.

THE TWENTY WHITE BOY NAMES THAT BEST SIGNIFY HIGH-EDUCATION PARENTS*

(YEARS OF MOTHER'S EDUCATION IN PARENTHESES)

1.	Dov	(16.50)	11.	Finnegan	(16.13)
2.	Akiva	(16.42)	12.	MacGregor	(16.10)
3.	Sander	(16.29)	13.	Florian	(15.94)
4.	Yannick	(16.20)	14.	Zev	(15.92)
5.	Sacha	(16.18)	15.	Beckett	(15.91)
6.	Guillaume	(16.17)	16.	Kia	(15.90)
7.	Elon	(16.16)	17.	Ashkon	(15.84)
8.	Ansel	(16.14)	18.	Harper	(15.83)
9.	Yonah	(16.14)	19.	Sumner	(15.77)
10.	Tor	(16.13)	20.	Calder	(15.75)

* WITH A MINIMUM OF 10 OCCURRENCES

If many names on the above lists were unfamiliar to you, don't feel bad. Even boys' names—which have always been scarcer than girls'—have been proliferating wildly. This means that even the most popular names today are less popular than they used to be. Consider the ten most popular names given to black baby boys in California in 1990 and then in 2000. The top ten in 1990 includes 3,375 babies (18.7 percent of those born that year), while the top ten in 2000 includes only 2,115 (14.6 percent of those born that year).

MOST POPULAR BLACK BOY NAMES

(NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES IN PARENTHESES)

	1990			2000	
1.	Michael	(532)	1.	Isaiah	(308)
2.	Christopher	(531)	2.	Jordan	(267)
3.	Anthony	(395)	3.	Elijah	(262)
4.	Brandon	(323)	4.	Michael	(235)
5.	James	(303)	5.	Joshua	(218)
6.	Joshua	(301)	6.	Anthony	(208)
7.	Robert	(276)	7.	Christopher	(169)
8.	David	(243)	8.	Jalen	(159)
9.	Kevin	(240)	9.	Brandon	(148)
10.	Justin	(231)	10.	Justin	(141)

In the space of ten years, even the most popular name among black baby boys (532 occurrences for Michael) became far less popular (308 occurrences for Isaiah). So parents are plainly getting more diverse with names. But there's another noteworthy shift in these lists: a very quick rate of turnover. Note that four of the 1990 names (James, Robert, David, and Kevin) fell out of the top ten by 2000. Granted, they made up the bottom half of the 1990 list. But the names that replaced them in 2000 *weren't* bottom dwellers. Three of the new names—Isaiah, Jordan, and Elijah—were in fact numbers one, two, and three in 2000. For an even more drastic example of how quickly and thoroughly a name can cycle in and out of use, consider the ten most popular names given to white girls in California in 1960 and then in 2000.

MOST POPULAR WHITE GIRL NAMES

1960	2000
1. Susan	1. Emily
2. Lisa	2. Hannah
3. Karen	3. Madison
4. Mary	4. Sarah
5. Cynthia	5. Samantha
6. Deborah	6. Lauren
7. Linda	7. Ashley
8. Patricia	8. Emma
9. Debra	9. Taylor
10. Sandra	10. Megan

Not a single name from 1960 remains in the top ten. But, you say, it's hard to stay popular for forty years. So how about comparing today's most popular names with the top ten from only twenty years earlier?

MOST POPULAR WHITE GIRL NAMES

1980	2000
1. Jennifer	1. Emily
2. Sarah	2. Hannah
3. Melissa	3. Madison
4. Jessica	4. Sarah
5. Christina	5. Samantha
6. Amanda	6. Lauren

7. Nicole	7. Ashley
8. Michelle	8. Emma
9. Heather	9. Taylor
10. Amber	10. Megan

A single holdover: Sarah. So where do these Emilys and Emmas and Laurens all come from? Where on earth did *Madison* come from? * It's easy enough to see that new names become very popular very fast—but why?

Let's take another look at a pair of earlier lists. Here are the most popular names given to baby girls in the 1990s among low-income families and among families of middle income or higher.

MOST COMMON "HIGH-END" WHITE GIRL NAMES IN THE 1990S

1. Alexandra	4. Madison
2. Lauren	5. Rachel
3. Katherine	

MOST COMMON "LOW-END" WHITE GIRL NAMES IN THE 1990S

1. Amber	4. Stephanie
2. Heather	5. Alyssa
3. Kayla	

* Madison almost certainly came from the 1984 movie *Splash*, starring Darryl Hannah as a mermaid who comes ashore in New York City and takes her name from the street sign for Madison Avenue. For humans, the name soon progressed from exceedingly rare to a perennial top five choice.

Notice anything? You might want to compare these names with the "Most Popular White Girl Names" list on page 202 that includes the top ten overall names from 1980 and 2000. Lauren and Madison, two of the most popular "high-end" names from the 1990s, made the 2000 top ten list. Amber and Heather, meanwhile, two of the overall most popular names from 1980, are now among the "low-end" names.

There is a clear pattern at play: once a name catches on among high-income, highly educated parents, it starts working its way down the socioeconomic ladder. Amber and Heather started out as high-end names, as did Stephanie and Brittany. For every high-end baby named Stephanie or Brittany, another five lower-income girls received those names within ten years.

So where do lower-end families go name-shopping? Many people assume that naming trends are driven by celebrities. But celebrities actually have a weak effect on baby names. As of 2000, the pop star Madonna had sold 130 million records worldwide but hadn't generated even the ten copycat namings—in California, no less—required to make the master index of four thousand names from which the sprawling list of girls' names on page 290 was drawn. Or considering all the Brittanys, Britneys, Brittanis, Brittanies, Brittneys, and Brittnis you encounter these days, you might think of Britney Spears. But she is in fact a symptom, not a cause, of the Brittany/Britney/Brittani/Brittanie/Brittney/Brittni explosion. With the most common spelling of the name, Brittany, at number eighteen among high-end families and number five among low-end families, it is surely approaching its pull date. Decades earlier, Shirley Temple was similarly a symptom of the Shirley boom, though she is often now remembered as its cause. (It should also be noted that many girls' names, including Shirley,

Carol, Leslie, Hilary, Renee, Stacy, and Tracy began life as boys' names, but girls' names almost never cross over to boys.)

So it isn't famous people who drive the name game. It is the family just a few blocks over, the one with the bigger house and newer car. The kind of families that were the first to call their daughters Amber or Heather and are now calling them Lauren or Madison. The kind of families that used to name their sons Justin or Brandon and are now calling them Alexander or Benjamin. Parents are reluctant to poach a name from someone *too* near—family members or close friends—but many parents, whether they realize it or not, like the sound of names that sound "successful."

But as a high-end name is adopted en masse, high-end parents begin to abandon it. Eventually, it is considered so common that even lower-end parents may not want it, whereby it falls out of the rotation entirely. The lower-end parents, meanwhile, go looking for the next name that the upper-end parents have broken in.

So the implication is clear: the parents of all those Alexandras, Laurens, Katherines, Madisons, and Rachels should not expect the cachet to last much longer. Those names are already on their way to overexposure. Where, then, will the new high-end names come from?

It wouldn't be surprising to find them among the "smartest" girls' and boys' names in California, listed on pages 199–200, that are still fairly obscure. Granted, some of them—Oona and Glynnis, Florian and Kia—are bound to remain obscure. The same could be surmised of most of the Hebrew names (Rotem and Zofia, Akiva and Zev), even though many of today's most mainstream names (David, Jonathan, Samuel, Benjamin, Rachel, Hannah, Sarah, Rebecca) are of course Hebrew biblical names.

Aviva may be the one modern Hebrew name that is ready to break out: it's easy to pronounce, pretty, peppy, and suitably flexible.

Drawn from a pair of "smart" databases, here is a sampling of today's high-end names. Some of them, as unlikely as it seems, are bound to become tomorrow's mainstream names. Before you scoff, ask yourself this: do any of them seem more ridiculous than "Madison" might have seemed ten years ago?

MOST POPULAR GIRLS' NAMES OF 2015?

Annika	Eleanora	Isabel	Maya
Ansley	Ella	Kate	Philippa
Ava	Emma	Lara	Phoebe
Avery	Fiona	Linden	Quinn
Aviva	Flannery	Maeve	Sophie
Clementine	Grace	Marie-Claire	Waverly

MOST POPULAR BOYS' NAMES OF 2015?

Aidan	Bennett	Johan	Reagan
Aldo	Carter	Keyon	Sander
Anderson	Cooper	Liam	Sumner
Ansel	Finnegan	Maximilian	Will
Asher	Harper	McGregor	
Beckett	Jackson	Oliver	

Obviously, a variety of motives are at work when parents consider a name for their child. They may want something traditional or something bohemian, something unique or something perfectly trendy. It would be an overstatement to suggest that all parents are looking—whether consciously or not—for a "smart" name or a "high-end" name. But they are all trying to signal *something* with a name, whether the name is Winner or Loser, Madison or Amber, Shithead or Sander, DeShawn or Jake. What the California names data suggest is that an overwhelming number of parents use a name to signal *their own expectations* of how successful their children will be. The name isn't likely to make a shard of difference. But the parents can at least feel better knowing that, from the very outset, they tried their best.