

The New Zealand Herald

Naming your baby isn't easy

By [Abby Gillies](#)

5:30 AM Saturday Aug 11, 2012

Parents are finding it harder to pick – and stick – with names for their newborns. *Abby Gillies* reports

It wasn't until Marietta Ah Chong was pregnant with her first child that she found out her partner's sister expected to choose the name.

She wasn't familiar, or comfortable, with the Tongan tradition and ultimately rejected it: "I was not prepared to do that. He was my son."

Instead, she and her partner, who are no longer together, compromised on the name Rob Fonokalafi Ah Chong Vakalani – preserving their son's ties to his Samoan, Tongan and Chinese ancestry.

Liz Barry and her husband aren't finding it any easier to pick baby names – even as they approach the birth of their fourth child.

The couple struggled to agree on a name and believe the decision is "very important".

"There's a vibrational frequency that goes with that name and in everyday life you hear your name a lot," she says.

They're not the only parents who struggle to pick – and stick – with names for their newborns.

In the past year, parents of 762 children spent \$51 to change their names legally before their second birthday – a 12 per cent rise from the previous year.

Some experts attribute the indecision to globalisation, with parents wanting their children to stand out in an increasingly homogenised world. Jurga Zilinskiene is director of London-based Today Translations.

New Zealanders are among those contacting the company, which charges £1000 (\$1900) to check the meanings of a prospective name in 100 languages.

"The trend is everybody's seeking something unique, something new. I think they're always fearful about being copied – we get quite a few questioning, 'Can we copyright the name?'" Ms Zilinskiene says.

The company cites the example of Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes' daughter, Suri.

Had her parents checked beforehand, they would have found out her name means "pickpocket" in Japanese, "turned sour" in French and "horse mackerels" in Italian.

A name not only sets someone apart, it helps define them, and parents simply "want to give a name that will help their child in the future", says Ms Zilinskiene.

With that weight of expectation, it's no wonder some parents want to take their time.

Last year, 61,400 children were born in New Zealand. Most parents registered their baby's name within two months, but some took much longer.



Geeta Bhan says she and her husband rejected many names before deciding on Khrishant. Photo / Natalie Slade

Hospitals and midwives notify the Births, Deaths and Marriages office when a baby is born and parents need to register the child's name within a "reasonable and practical time".

Department of Internal Affairs spokesman Michael Mead said those who don't are sent reminders, and face a fine of up to \$1000 if they ignore them.

Mr Mead said the department sought to highlight the benefits of registering a child's name – doing so allows them to enrol in school, get a passport and open a bank account – rather than punish parents with a fine.

That was a "last resort" and he wasn't aware of any such cases in his four years at the department.

So is the indecision worthwhile? Does choice of name really matter? Most definitely, says Auckland University linguist Dr Helen Charters.

"Rightly or wrongly people tend to associate certain qualities with certain names," she says.

Large open-mouth vowel sounds are often associated with big things or strength, while 'ee' sounds are associated with smaller things.

The way we feel about ourselves then is influenced by how others may judge us based on our name, says Dr Charters.

And our changing names choices reflect the way cultures were mixing, she says.

"What we're seeing is a total relaxation of any kind of social rules around naming at all. These days it seems as likely that people will choose totally new names."

The most popular girl's name in New Zealand last year was Ruby, followed by Olivia, Sophie, Isabella, Charlotte, Grace, Ella, Lilly, Emily and Amelia.

For the boys, Liam, Joshua, Oliver, Lucas, William, Noah, Samuel, James, Benjamin and Jack made up the top 10.

During her 16-year career, Auckland midwife Jude Cottrell has noticed changing trends and points to the rise of those with cultural and biblical significance.

Younger parents were more likely to go for text names or phonetic spelling such as Gorja, she says.

One creative couple recently called their son Looc, the phonetic spelling of Luke and cool spelled backwards.

Another that stood out was a boy named Lifebuoy.

Mum Kreshar Fruean, 25, comes from a family with unusual names, a tradition she has carried on with her own sons Payton, 4, and Kruz, 20 months.

"As far as my kids, I didn't want anything normal. My partner wanted Joseph and I thought 'boring'."

Many mothers named their baby after someone in the father's family, with good reason, she believes.

"I think that on a sort of primal level it must be a way of sort of roping in the male to keep supporting the genetic DNA. To keep that male tied in so that he's got that family pride in going forth and often you'll see that the women will totally defer to the men around names and around their family names."

Ms Cottrell said names were powerful indicators of where people put themselves and what happens to them in the world. "It's hugely significant I would say."

Dr Charters advised parents considering names to think about how they could be changed or used as a nickname, consider a name with family significance to show the baby belongs to part of a bigger unit and not to worry too much.

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet, as Shakespeare says."

Getting it right

- * All names registered by parents are checked by the Department of Internal Affairs
- * They should not cause offence, include or resemble an official title or rank, or be unreasonably long
- * Names shouldn't include punctuation marks, brackets or numbers
- * Rejected names have included Sir, Satan and 4Real
- * 61,400 births registered last year
- * 762 children had their names changed in the past year
- * \$1000 maximum fine for parents who don't register their children's name in "reasonable and practical time"

Taking time to choose well worth it, say couple

For four months, Khrishant Pritesh Pretan Bhan was called simply "baby".

After coming up with lists of possible names, mum Geeta and dad Pritesh tested some and vetoed many until selecting one with family, cultural and religious meaning.

It is a huge relief for Mrs Bhan, 34, who admits the process "took a lot longer than it should have".

"Now that we've kind of settled on a name, that's the next stage, he's kind of growing up. No more baby," she said, smiling at her boy.

Unlike many mothers, Mrs Bhan did not consider names while pregnant.

Indian couples are traditionally guided by their priest when picking one. In line with tradition, they provided the date, time and birthplace to the priest, who directed them to choose a name beginning with "Kh" or "J".

Her husband was against "J" names, so they worked through a list of possible "Kh" names, picking Khushant before deciding it did not feel right.

Meanwhile, they had received a letter from the Department of Internal Affairs saying they would be fined \$1000 if they did not register a name by November.

The couple finally decided on Khrishant, for its sound and meanings, the God Krishna and peace. The middle names came from his father and father-in-law.

"All Indian names have some sort of meaning. To me it's important," Mrs Bhan said.

The new mother is pleased they waited and advises other parents not to rush.

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