

# Does Namesaking a Child Influence Attachment Style?

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An online study involving 260 adults revealed that male children are more likely to be named after a parent or other relative than are female children, and that middle names are the most common vehicle for providing a namesake for a newborn child. While we also found that individuals without siblings scored significantly higher on a measure of romantic attachment anxiety than did first-born children, there was no other evidence that birth order or being a namesake is related to the attachment bonds that one forms with other people.

Naming a child may be the first act of parenting, and deciding to “namesake” a child – name him or her after a parent or other relative – is often part of the conversation about naming a child. At this point in time, a few things that we know about namesaking are that boys are namesaked more often than girls (Johnson, et al., 1991; McAndrew, King, & Honoroff, 2002; Rabinovich, 1994), and that patrilineal namesaking is more common than matrilineal namesaking, especially for boys (Brown, Carvallo, & Imura, 2014; McAndrew et al., 2002). Birth order also appears to be an important variable in namesaking a boy, but is almost irrelevant for the namesaking of girls (McAndrew et al., 2002).

However, we know very little about the consequences of namesaking for the parent-child relationship. It is possible that namesaking may enhance the sense of relatedness and familiarity that parents and other caregivers feel toward the newest member of the family, so namesaking may be an important, yet understudied, factor in understanding the bond between parents and their children.

Evidence that namesaking is an attempt to increase perceptions of the child’s genetic relatedness to the parents may be found in cases of adoption. The adopted newborn is more of a stranger to the parents since the biological stages of development and the rituals surrounding the impending arrival of a biological child are often lacking. Consequently, the biological child is recognized at birth as a family member without qualification (Kirk, 1984). Kirk (1984) reports that mothers of adopted infants do not at first share the same feelings of warmth and maternal

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closeness reported by biological mothers. The naming of nonbiological children after a parent or other relative may be a means of inducing others to treat the child as if it were in fact one's own genetic kin; this, in turn, would reinforce and facilitate the parents' own parenting behaviors. Hence, the naming of the adopted child may take on special significance in reassuring both the child and the child's new relatives that there are no important differences between the child and his or her "kin." On the other hand, the importance of the child's given name decreases when genetic kinship is assured.

Johnson, McAndrew, and Harris (1991) confirmed that adopted children are in fact more likely to be namesaked than nonadopted children and that they were more likely to be given both a first name and a middle name in honor of a relative. They also found that in biological families, but not in adoptive families, children were more likely to be named after a patrilineal relative, usually the father. They concluded that this did not happen in adoptive families because in those cases both parents were equally sure that the child was not genetically related to them. These results are consistent with the notion that there may be an intimate relationship between namesaking and attachment between parents and children.

While both parents are usually involved in the naming of children, the evidence is that, at least in the United States, the mother is the more influential parent when choosing a name (Levine & Willis, 1994). Hence, the mother has the ability to publicly identify the father in an attempt to increase the likelihood of his sticking around and being a good provider (Jankowiak & Woodman, 2002). For children born out of wedlock, naming the child after the father has in fact been shown to be a strong predictor of the long-term relationship between the father and the child as reflected by the amount of contact between them and the degree of financial assistance provided by the father. These same studies have also reported that sons with the same first names as their fathers had fewer behavioral problems such as bedwetting, temper tantrums, and general disobedience and that they also scored higher on tests of cognitive skills (Furstenberg & Talvitie, 1980).

Given the aforementioned findings, it would make sense that namesaking a child has ramifications for the attachment bonds that form between children and their parents (Vicary, 2011). So far, no research has focused on this particular question. It was the goal of this study to explore the relationship between namesaking and affectional bonds with parents; out of curiosity, we also examined romantic attachment.

## METHOD

### Participants

Two hundred and sixty adult volunteers were recruited via a snowball sampling technique through the Facebook networks of the researchers and by emailing the students and faculty of the college where the researchers are located. Forty of these individuals were eliminated from the analyses for failure to complete the survey or because they did not identify their gender in a binary fashion. This resulted in a final sample size of 220 (47 males, 173 females). The original sample consisted of 206 Caucasian, 20 Asian, ten Hispanic, two African-American, and one Native American participants. Eleven participants identified as multiracial or declined to identify their ethnicity.

### Materials and Procedure

Participants accessed an online Qualtrics survey via a link provided through Facebook or email. They supplied the following demographic information: Race/ethnicity, gender, birth order, adoption status, whether they had two same-sex parents, whether or not they were namesaked, and whether a namesake was their first name, middle name, or both. They also indicated which relatives they shared names with.

The participants completed Fraley, Waller, & Brennan's (2000) *Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised* (ECR-R) scale. This 36 item questionnaire consists of two scales that measure attachment on the dimensions of anxiety and avoidance. We also created two sets of questions designed to measure each person's affectional bond with his or her mother and father. All questionnaires entailed the participant agreeing or disagreeing with a series of statements on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) Likert Scale. Items from the ECR-R included statements such as "I'm afraid I will lose my partner's love" and "I worry a lot about my relationships." Statements from the sets of questions measuring bonds with parents included items such as "I feel closer to my father/mother than I do towards my siblings" and "I consider my father/mother to be my closest friend." On all scales, a higher score indicates more of whatever is being measured (i.e., romantic anxiety, romantic avoidance, and closeness of bonds with father and mother). The internal reliability of all four of these measures was excellent: romantic anxiety scale  $\alpha = .939$ ; romantic avoidance scale  $\alpha = .881$ ; maternal bond scale  $\alpha = .909$ ; and paternal bond scale  $\alpha = .910$ . Other studies have established acceptable validity and reliability of the ECR-R (Sibley, Fischer, & Liu, 2005).

### RESULTS

The frequency of namesaking broken down by birth order and gender can be seen in Table 1. Male children were significantly more likely to be namesaked than were female children (76.6% vs. 56.1%;  $\chi^2(1) = 6.52, p < 0.05$ ), but birth order was not related to namesaking for either males ( $\chi^2(3) = 0.97, n.s.$ ) or females ( $\chi^2(3) = 0.38, n.s.$ ). Children who were namesaked were most likely to receive the namesake via a middle name (males: 58.3%; females: 64.9%), and they were more likely to receive both middle and first name namesakes than first names only (males: 36.1% vs. 5.6%; females: 28.9% vs. 6.2%).

TABLE 1 Raw Frequencies of Namesaking by Birth Order & Gender

	<i>N</i>	Only Child	First-Born	Middle-Born	Last-Born	Total
Male	47					
Namesaked		7	15	6	8	36
Unique Name		2	4	1	4	11
Female	173					
Namesaked		9	42	18	28	97
Unique Name		7	31	17	21	76
Total	220	25	92	42	61	220

A 2 (male, female) X 2 (namesaked, not namesaked) X 4 (only child, first born, middle born, last born) ANOVA was performed on the four attachment measures. There was a significant main effect of birth order on romantic attachment avoidance scores,  $F(3, 204) = 3.725, p = .013$ , and a *post hoc* Tukey HSD Test revealed that children without siblings reported a significantly higher romantic attachment avoidance score than first-born children ( $p < .019$ ). The means and SDs were: Only Children = 3.39 (.853), First-Borns = 2.77 (.862), Middle-Borns = 2.84 (.837), Last-Borns = 3.02 (.900). However, no other significant main effects or interactions appeared.

### DISCUSSION

We replicated the findings of others (Johnson, et al., 1991; McAndrew, et al., 2002; Rabinovich, 1994) that male children are more likely to be namesaked than female children, and also replicated the finding that middle names are the most common vehicle for providing a namesake. Although the gap between namesaked and uniquely named individuals was greatest for first-born male children (see Table 1), We failed to replicate the finding that birth order is a statistically significant

factor in the namesaking of boys (McAndrew, et al., 2002), very likely due to the small ( $N = 47$ ) number of male participants in our sample.

Every study has shortcomings, and this study suffers from a reliance on a relatively small and homogenous sample. In hindsight, we also wish we had collected more demographic information such as the age of each participant. Having said this, the replication of the finding that male children are most likely to be namesaked indicates the robustness of this phenomenon, and our finding that only children had higher romantic attachment avoidance scores suggests a possible role for birth order in romantic attachment that has been heretofore unexplored.

In spite of the intuitively appealing hypothesis that namesaking would be related to attachment to parents and possibly to romantic partners as well, we found no evidence that this was true. As is often the case, this study leaves us feeling more confident that we understand some of the dynamics of namesaking, such as who will be namesaked and how that will be done, but less confident that we understand much about the role played by namesaking in forging bonds between parents and their offspring.

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