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***Twilight* Zone: Why Do Babies Have the Same Names?**

By Claire Suddath

People are naming their children after vampires. The Social Security Administration has released its list of 2009's most popular baby names, and the leading choices were Isabella and Jacob. Both names just happen to belong to main characters in the *Twilight* book series. True, Isabella has been trending steadily upward since the 1990s, and Jacob has been in the top spot for 10 years in a row (thus predating 2005's *Twilight*). But one of the rising names is almost certainly the result of Stephenie Meyer's blood-sucking romance: Cullen. The last name of Meyer's sexy main vampire jumped 297 spots in one year and is now the 485th most popular first name for a baby boy.

Cullen is also part of a larger trend: two-syllable male names that end in the sound *en*. Aiden is another example (12th most popular name). So is Jayden (No. 8), Logan (No. 17), Nathan (No. 24), Kevin (No. 44), Justin (No. 46) and a name I'd never heard of before: Brayden. At No. 47, it means I'll probably start meeting a number of Braydens in about 20 years. Likewise, nearly half of the 50 most popular girl names end in the letter *a*, like Isabella. Why does this happen? Why do parents so often choose the same names for their newborns?

The short answer is that people copy one another, and no one likes to be *that* unique. Just as fashion and music trends wax and wane, so do baby names. Girls born in the 1980s were given perky, peppy monikers that ended in *y* or *ie* — Tiffany, Ashley, Katie, Brittany. These days it's all about the soft, feminine ending: Isabella, Emma, Kayla and Ella. Sociologists and journalists often propose theories about child names, though they usually end up being nothing more than unfounded speculation. CBS News once asserted that Emma became popular in 2002 because Jennifer Aniston's character named her child that on *Friends*. But Emma had been on the rise

since the 1980s and broke into the top 20 a full three years before Rachel and Ross had their fictional night of passion. *Friends* probably had little to do with it.

Dig a little deeper and baby-name trends become more complicated. According to Roland Fryer of Harvard University and Steven Levitt of the University of Chicago, blacks and whites chose similar names for their babies until the 1970s, when hospitals began seeing a rise in so-called black names such as Ebony, Shanice and Darnell. The racial name divide is now so strong that Fryer and Levitt say 40% of all African-American babies born in California are given a name that doesn't appear on even a single white baby's birth certificate. (They limited their study to California for simplicity's sake.)

Geography may also play a part. In 2009, Hebrew University researchers Jacob Goldenberg and Moshe Levy looked at the varying popularity of names in different U.S. states. They found that people are likely to give their kids names that are popular in their town, city or state. Judging from the Social Security's name database, they seem to be right. Isabella broke the top 5 on the most-popular list first in Colorado and Rhode Island. From Colorado, it spread to California, Nevada and Arizona. From Rhode Island, it hit Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey. Now it's all over the country.

But why did it start in Colorado and Rhode Island? And what happened in 1991 to suddenly shoot the name up 210 spots, from No. 698 to a still fairly uncommon 488, in just one year? Unfortunately, no one really knows. Ultimately, baby names remain subject to the whims of the people who bestow them. Parents are responsible for all the Isabellas, Emmas and Madisons in the world, not to mention the creative spellings (Keighty instead of Katie, Danyale instead of Danielle) certain to drive their children mad for the rest of their lives.