

# Parents buy domain names for babies

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By Paul Connors, AP

Mark and Corrie Pankow with their children, clockwise from upper left, Carter (6), Makenzie (9), Davis (3) and Sydney (5) in their home in Peoria, Ariz.

By Anick Jesdanun, Associated Press

NEW YORK — Besides leaving the hospital with a birth certificate and a clean bill of health, baby Mila Belle Howells got something she won't likely use herself for several years: her very own Internet domain name.

Likewise newborn Bennett Pankow joined his four older siblings in getting his own Internet moniker. In fact, before naming his child, Mark Pankow checked to make sure "BennettPankow.com" hadn't already been claimed.

## DIGITAL DADDIES: Domain name sellers

"One of the criteria was, if we liked the name, the domain had to be available," Pankow said. It was, and Pankow quickly grabbed Bennett's online identity.

A small but growing number of parents are getting domain names for their young kids, long before they can do more than peck aimlessly at a keyboard.

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It's not known exactly how many, but the practice is no longer limited to parents in Web design or information technology.

They worry that the name of choice might not be available by the time their babies become teens or adults, just as someone claimed the ".com" for Britney Spears' 11-month-old son before she could.

The trend hints at the potential importance of domain names in establishing one's future digital identity.

Think of how much a typical teen's online life now revolves around Facebook or News Corp.'s MySpace. Imagine if one day the domain could take you directly to those social-networking profiles, blogs, photo albums and more.

"It is the starting point for your online identity," said Warren Adelman, president of registration company GoDaddy.com, which sells basic domain name packages for about \$9 a year. "We do believe the domain name is the foundation upon which all the other Internet services are based."

Hundreds of companies sell domain names with suffixes like ".com," ".org" and ".info," which individuals can then link to personal websites and e-mail accounts. Parents simply visit one of those companies' websites, search for the name they want and, if no one else has claimed it yet, buy it on the spot with a credit card.

There's no guarantee, though, that domain names will have as central a role in online identity. After all, with search engines getting smarter, Internet users can simply type the name of a person into Google.

"Given the pace of change on the Internet, it strikes me as a pretty impressive leap of faith that we're going to use exactly the same system and the same tools ... 15 to 20 years from today," said Peter Grunwald, whose Grunwald Associates firm specializes in researching kids and technology.

Still, even if the effort is for naught, \$9 a year is cheap compared with the cost of diapers and college tuition.

Besides providing an easy-to-remember Web address, the domain name makes possible e-mail addresses without awkward numbers — as in "JohnSmith24", because 23 other John Smiths had beaten your child to Google's Gmail service.

Parents not ready to commit or knowledgeable enough on how to buy a domain, though, are at least trying their luck with Microsoft's Hotmail or Gmail.

Melissa Coleman of Springfield, Mass., grabbed Hotmail addresses for her two kids. She said the kids' grandparents occasionally send e-greeting cards to those accounts, and she sends thank you notes for gifts in her child's voice.

"I think it's great that it's so loud and that it came with an actual WORKING MICROPHONE ... and I'm not sure what 'annoying' means, but I'm sure it means that Mommy loves it too!!!!," read one message to Grandpa.

She said she logs in at least once every month to keep the accounts active and plans to save all messages for when her children get older.

Tony Howells, a business consultant in Salt Lake City, got a Gmail address along with the domain name for his daughter, believing people would enjoy seeing "an e-mail address pop up for an 8-month-old who is obviously not equipped to use it."

Although some parents have yet to use the domain names they've bought, others are sending visitors to baby photos, blogs and other personal sites. Domain name owners have a variety of options to have their personal sites hosted, typically for free or less than \$10 a month. They include baby-gear services like [TotSites.com](#) and [BabyHomePages.net](#).

Theresa Pinder initially received a domain name as a Christmas gift from her son's godparents and gives it out to friends and family who want updates.

"People are like, 'Wow. He already has his own website,'" said Pinder, a physician assistant in Phoenix.

There are downsides to all this, though: An easy-to-remember domain also makes a child easier for strangers to find. Chances are one only needs to know a child's name and add ".com."

Pankow, a database administrator in Phoenix, said that was one concern keeping him from using the domains he bought for his five children, including a 9-year-old daughter.

"I'd want to research and try to figure out how easy it is to find out what school she goes to and where she lives" based on the website and domain name, Pankow said.

GoDaddy and many other registration companies offer proxy services that let domain name buyers register anonymously. Otherwise, the person's name, address and other contact information are publicly searchable.

Notwithstanding the privacy concerns, Adelman said domain names for kids have become more and more popular as parents start to get domains for their business or family and realize how difficult it is to find ".com" names not yet claimed.

But the numbers are still relatively low. Our Baby Homepage, which lets parents set up personal baby pages with photos and greetings, says only 10% of its customers have bought their own domains. A similar service, Baby's First Site, considered selling domains for parents but didn't get much interest.

Brian Vannoy, founder of TotSites, said parents might need more lessons on safety measures such as how to password-protect sites. But he believes the hurdles can be overcome once parents who are less-savvy about technology see the benefits.

"It's easy to remember," Vannoy said. "Everybody knows the new baby's name."

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