

“Can’t you shorten your name?!?”

-- Rajita Chennapragada

Excerpt of my letter to pre-school director:

Dear Director - My 4-year-old son is a student in your pre-school and I wanted to share some feedback with you and hope to come to some meaningful solution.

A few months ago, as my son started learning to write his full name in school, he started telling me that he didn't like doing it because his last name was too long. He had been learning to write it at home and never complained previously.

I talked to my son about being proud of his name and that it wasn't a bad thing to have a long last name. He then told me that one of his teachers tells him regularly that his name is too long. In fact, several weeks ago, right in front of me, this very teacher told my son that he needed to "Yell at Daddy for giving him such a long last name." I was speechless when I heard this.

This morning, another teacher, proceeded to tell me that I need to shorten my son's last name. She mentioned that he complains everyday about it. He actually hasn't said a word recently about this issue and this morning was going about the normal routine. Again, to not get confrontational, I simply told the teacher that my son would learn his name like any other task.

I know these 2 teachers didn't mean any harm by what they said and are loving caregivers. But, there is hidden meaning and context in what children pick up. I was very impressed by the cultural sensitivity you are teaching kids about respect for diversity of all kinds. Perhaps, if this could extend to the teaching staff, it would provide a good model for them and mostly, extend into your school's mission of having more confident children.

Sincerely,
Rajita Chennapragada

How many times have you been asked why Indian names were so long, so hard to pronounce, and blah, blah, blah....? Was I overly sensitive in this case? Did I go too far in getting 2 pre-school teachers in trouble for telling my son that his name was too long?

As South Indians we face the drill of having long names and the confusion of family members with different last names based on the traditions of the family and regional nuances. It can be confusing and our names are certainly bewildering to many. I was born and raised in the U.S. and have been teased and taunted about my own name (not just by kids but later, by other adults). I always felt the need to apologize for having such a hard and different name. I suppose this experience makes me more sensitive to children being prideful in their heritage and the special meaning behind the name all parents, regardless of their heritage, give their children.

So perhaps the next time a telemarketer mangles your name only to blame *you* for this mishap, or a colleague or coach tells you or your child that you ought to shorten your name or get a nickname, think about how you would react or have reacted. I have learned the art of silence when someone feels it is their right to make fun of me. But I have also learned that there are many people who are simply afraid of something unknown and different. They can pronounce "Giuseppe" with no problem, but when they see the 13 letters in Chennapragada, they freak out (I think Chennapragada is easier to pronounce but, of course, I am biased). You may have your own strategy, but I think that walking the fearful person through a name's pronunciation is key. After all, having grown up here, I see some Indian names which I mispronounce myself.

So the approach should be balance – respect the new person's lack of experience with a new combination of letters, and help them out. However, when met with a disregard for respect for diversity, stand up for the name that is rightfully yours with a need to be pronounced as it should be (well...at least a close compromise!).