

German Childhoods

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In addition to the obvious records such as church books, census and resident lists, family sheets, house indexes, penitent indexes, or testaments, there are a number of other documents that may have been created that can help you trace the lives of children in Germany.

Adoption and Guardianship Files

Adoption and guardianship cases are generally found among court files. Guardianship files pertain to underage children following the death of the father or mother; by the 20th century these files also dealt with paternity of illegitimate children.

School Records

Between 1763 (Prussia) and 1835 (Saxony), the former German provinces formally established general compulsory school attendance. Many local archives have files on private and public schools; however, most of the schools' records cover only administrative issues. Lists with names and personal data of students are the exception and are more common among collections from institutions of higher education.

As Schleswig and Holstein had close ties to Denmark, it is worth noting that Denmark established schools throughout the land by 1741. In several Danish provinces, schools took censuses in the 1730s and 1740s that listed each student's age, education level, and attendance.

Poor Houses or Orphanages

Entire families could live in poor houses when a father was unable to provide for his family. The records of these institutions often differentiated between admitted adults and children. Children were sometimes sent to local orphanages if no guardian or family member could care for them. These records usually indicate the length of stay as well as adoptions and deaths of children at the orphanage.

In Bavaria—Letter Protocols

Letter protocols are legal documents created by individuals and filed with the Bavarian government. These letters covered everything from weddings, passing a farm to the next generation, settlement of an estate, purchases and exchanges, guardianships, and more. By the 1860s they were partially replaced by the notary public certificates.

Wedding Contracts

These regulated everything that was brought into the marriage—both possessions and children from previous

relationships—as well as what was to become of them in case one of the spouses died. These contracts are a good indication of a family's social standing because they included such things as requirements for children to be raised in the Christian faith and how much money they had for food and clothes.

To find these records, check first with the state archive for the area in which your ancestors lived. Conduct an Internet search for the “state + archives” but note that not all archives will have an English page. You may want to check message boards at Ancestry.com or RootsWeb for assistance with the language and location or join a German American genealogy group for other ideas. Also check local town or community archives and genealogical societies for these and other unique records.

John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt—his name might be your name, too, if he's your grandfather.

Repeating family names was a way of honoring one's heritage and ancestors. Another reason for the repetition of names can stem from rights of primogeniture. A father passing his name on to his first son was an indication of the son's right of inheritance. For a family historian, however, naming patterns may also be a way of discovering more about a previous generation. While patterns of given names varied somewhat from ethnicity to ethnicity and sometimes religion to religion, most of them are based on the following very common Western European naming pattern:

- First son named for father's father
- Second son named for mother's father
- Third son named for father
- Fourth son named for father's eldest brother

The daughters followed suit:

- First daughter named for mother's mother
- Second daughter named for father's mother
- Third daughter named for mother
- Fourth daughter named for mother's eldest sister

There are exceptions. The the third and fourth places might be switched, the first daughter named for the father's mother, parents' names aren't included, or the first son might be named for the maternal grandpa instead. And none of this is set in stone. If a mother is named for her mother, for example, the “third daughter” slot is open for variation. In the event of a child's death, a subsequent sibling may be given the same name. Another deviation might be, in a second marriage, a child being named for a deceased spouse. And an old German tradition included giving a spiritual or saint name as a first name, followed by the name the child would actually be known by.

Search the Internet for “naming patterns” and the ethnicity of the family you're interested in (for example, “naming patterns + Irish”) and you'll be presented with numerous detailed lists; apply them to the names in your own family to see how devoted they were to tradition.