

Baby Faces

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Naturally Sheila thinks her two-month-old daughter is adorable. But so do complete strangers. In the park, at the market, just about everywhere the two of them go, the baby gets gushing compliments, coos, and aahs.

Sheila's baby is beautiful, to be sure. But most babies get a similar response. A baby's face is terribly attractive to adults and adolescents; even babies think other babies are special. Some scholars think this attachment is partly rooted in our biology.

Madison Avenue, well aware of this phenomenon, has successfully used babies to sell products ranging from toilet tissue to tires. *Parents* magazine nearly always has a baby, not a child, adolescent, or a parent, on the cover. Politicians have kissed so many babies that doing so has become a campaign cliché.

It's tempting to think this attraction is nature's way of promoting a loving bond between parent and child. And, there is some evidence to support the notion.

Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz observed that not only do the young of many animal species look differently than the adults, the differences are similar. Look at human babies, puppies, and chicks and you'll see larger heads relative to their bodies, more expansive foreheads, larger eyes, and shorter and flatter noses than the adults of those species.

Lorenz noted something else. Adults respond warmly to the very young of essentially all mammalian species of animals.

Taking it farther, Eckhard Hess of the University of Chicago observed that adults prefer pictures or drawings of babies and young animals to pictures of adults. Even adolescents are also attracted to babies, especially around puberty.

Saying we like babies is one thing. But Dr. Hess found evidence that, in some ways, babies may elicit an involuntary response from us. For example, the pupils of our eyes tend to widen at the sight of a baby, even if there is no change in the amount of light. Our pupils enlarge when we look at other things we like.

Babies may not always be beautiful to us. Fresh out of the womb, a baby can be a horrific sight: blotchy, red, puffy, with a lopsided head or bowed legs.

But soon, your newborn will be adorable, attracting attention, smiles, and silly utterances from friends, family, and strangers. We don't know why babies have such appeal, just that they do and that it is good. It provokes the love, attention, and protection they deserve.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.