

Downside to disaster relief: Why do photos of attractive children backfire?

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When it comes to asking a stranger for help, being young, pretty, and the opposite sex greatly improve your odds. But when it comes to children suffering from the likes of natural disaster, poverty, or homelessness, a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* reveals that less attractive children receive more help than their cuter counterparts.

"Many charitable organizations use [children](#) in advertising and promotional materials. Our research examines how the [facial attractiveness](#) of the children in these campaigns affects the empathy and help received from adults," write authors Robert J. Fisher and Yu Ma (both University of Alberta).

In a series of four experiments, participants were asked to visit fictional websites where they were asked to consider sponsoring a child from a developing country. The authors then systematically varied the levels of attractiveness of the children featured on the websites as well as their levels of need.

Results showed that when the children were portrayed as having a severe need (for example, orphaned as a result of a natural disaster), their facial attractiveness had no affect on helping responses. In contrast, when their need was not severe, participants felt less compassion and sympathy for an attractive child compared to an unattractive child in an identical circumstance.

The authors explain that this negative effect of attractiveness occurred

because participants inferred that the attractive children were more popular, intelligent, and helpful than their less attractive peers. They also observed this negative effect despite the fact that the children in the studies were obviously too young to care for themselves.

These results offer practical implications for how children are portrayed by disaster relief agencies, children's hospitals, and other charities. "We believe our research offers a positive and hopeful perspective on human behavior because it suggests that when a child is in obvious need, even strangers can feel compassion and offer aid irrespective of the child's physical appearance," the authors conclude.

More information: Robert J. Fisher and Yu Ma. "The Price of Being Beautiful: Negative Effects of Attractiveness on Empathy for Children in Need." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2014.

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