

Why do we think infant animals are so cute?

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Over 50 years ago, ethologist Konrad Lorenz proposed that infants appear cute so that parents are attracted to them and motivated to care for them. Lorenz described the Kindchenschema, "baby schema," facial features such as a large head, high and protruding forehead, large eyes, and small nose and mouth, which change proportions as the animal ages.

Previous research has shown that human infants with a greater degree of these features are judged to be cuter, are more likely to receive baby talk from adults, and elicit stronger motivations for caretaking.

If you walk into any toy store or zoo gift shop today, you will see that marketers have taken advantage of this effect.

Lorenz proposed that Kindchenschema co-evolved with cuteness perceptions and care-giving responses across species where parents take care of their young. This proposal was considered to be obviously true. Because the features themselves are widely observable in species with high degrees of [parental care](#), no one saw the need to empirically verify the effect.

Daniel J. Kruger, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Michigan, decided to put the proposal to the test. He showed people pictures of recently hatched infants from four semi-precocial [animal species](#) (requiring parental care) and four super-precocial animal species (which are completely independent and do not require parental care) living in their natural environments.

People rated the semi-precocial infants higher in attractiveness, cuteness, helplessness, and youthfulness, and thought that they were less mature and independent than the super-precocial infants. The semi-precocial infants also elicited greater care-taking reactions; people were more likely to want to hold them and adopt them, thought that they would want to be held more, and would be less likely to survive than the other infants. The effects were seen for pictures of both bird and reptile species.

"Non-mammalian infants requiring parental care elicit greater human caregiving reactions than superprecocial [infants](#) do" is published in the journal *Ethology*, the same journal that published Konrad Lorenz's original paper on Kindchenschema in 1943 (then named "Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie").

Provided by University of Michigan

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