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Ugly Children May Get Parental Short Shrift

By NICHOLAS BAKALAR

Parents would certainly deny it, but Canadian researchers have made a startling assertion: parents take better care of pretty children than they do ugly ones.

Researchers at the University of Alberta carefully observed how parents treated their children during trips to the supermarket. They found that physical attractiveness made a big difference.

The researchers noted if the parents belted their youngsters into the grocery cart seat, how often the parents' attention lapsed and the number of times the children were allowed to engage in potentially dangerous activities like standing up in the shopping cart. They also rated each child's physical attractiveness on a 10-point scale.

The findings, not yet published, were presented at the Warren E. Kalbach Population Conference in Edmonton, Alberta.

When it came to buckling up, pretty and ugly children were treated in starkly different ways, with seat belt use increasing in direct proportion to attractiveness. When a woman was in charge, 4 percent of the homeliest children were strapped in compared with 13.3 percent of the most attractive children. The difference was even more acute when fathers led the shopping expedition - in those cases, none of the least attractive children were secured with seat belts, while 12.5 percent of the prettiest children were.

Homely children were also more often out of sight of their parents, and they were more often allowed to wander more than 10 feet away.

Age - of parent and child - also played a role. Younger adults were more likely to buckle their children into the seat, and younger children were more often buckled in. Older adults, in contrast, were inclined to let children wander out of sight and more likely to allow them to engage in physically dangerous activities.

Although the researchers were unsure why, good-looking boys were usually kept in closer proximity to the adults taking care of them than were pretty girls. The researchers speculated that girls might be considered more competent and better able to act independently than boys of the same age. The researchers made more than 400 observations of child-parent interactions in 14 supermarkets.

Dr. W. Andrew Harrell, executive director of the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta and the leader of the research team, sees an evolutionary reason for the findings: pretty children, he says, represent the best genetic legacy, and therefore they get more care.

Not all experts agree. Dr. Frans de Waal, a professor of psychology at Emory University, said he was skeptical.

"The question," he said, "is whether ugly people have fewer offspring than handsome people. I doubt it very much. If the number of offspring are the same for these two categories, there's absolutely no evolutionary reason for parents to invest less in ugly kids."

Dr. Robert Sternberg, professor of psychology and education at Yale, said he saw problems in Dr. Harrell's method

and conclusions, for example, not considering socioeconomic status.

"Wealthier parents can feed, clothe and take care of their children better due to greater resources," Dr. Sternberg said, possibly making them more attractive. "The link to evolutionary theory is speculative."

But Dr. Harrell said the importance of physical attractiveness "cuts across social class, income and education."

"Like lots of animals, we tend to parcel out our resources on the basis of value," he said. "Maybe we can't always articulate that, but in fact we do it. There are a lot of things that make a person more valuable, and physical attractiveness may be one of them."