

Baby-Face Bias

A tendency to see people and things with baby-faced features as more naïve, helpless, and honest than those with mature features.

People and things with round features, large eyes, small noses, high foreheads, short chins, and relatively lighter skin and hair are perceived as babylike and, as a result, as having babylike personality attributes: naiveté, helplessness, honesty, and innocence. The bias is found across all age ranges, cultures, and many mammalian species.¹

The degree to which people are influenced by the baby-face bias is evident in how babies are treated by adults. For example, babies with weak baby-face features receive less positive attention from adults and are rated as less likable, less attractive, and less fun to be with than babies with strong baby-face features. Large, round heads and eyes appear to be the strongest of the facial cues contributing to this bias. For example, premature babies often lack these key baby-face features (e.g., their eyes are closed, and their heads are less round) and are rated by adults as less desirable to care for or be around. A potentially related phenomenon is the rate of child abuse for premature babies, which is approximately 300 percent greater than for normal-term babies.²

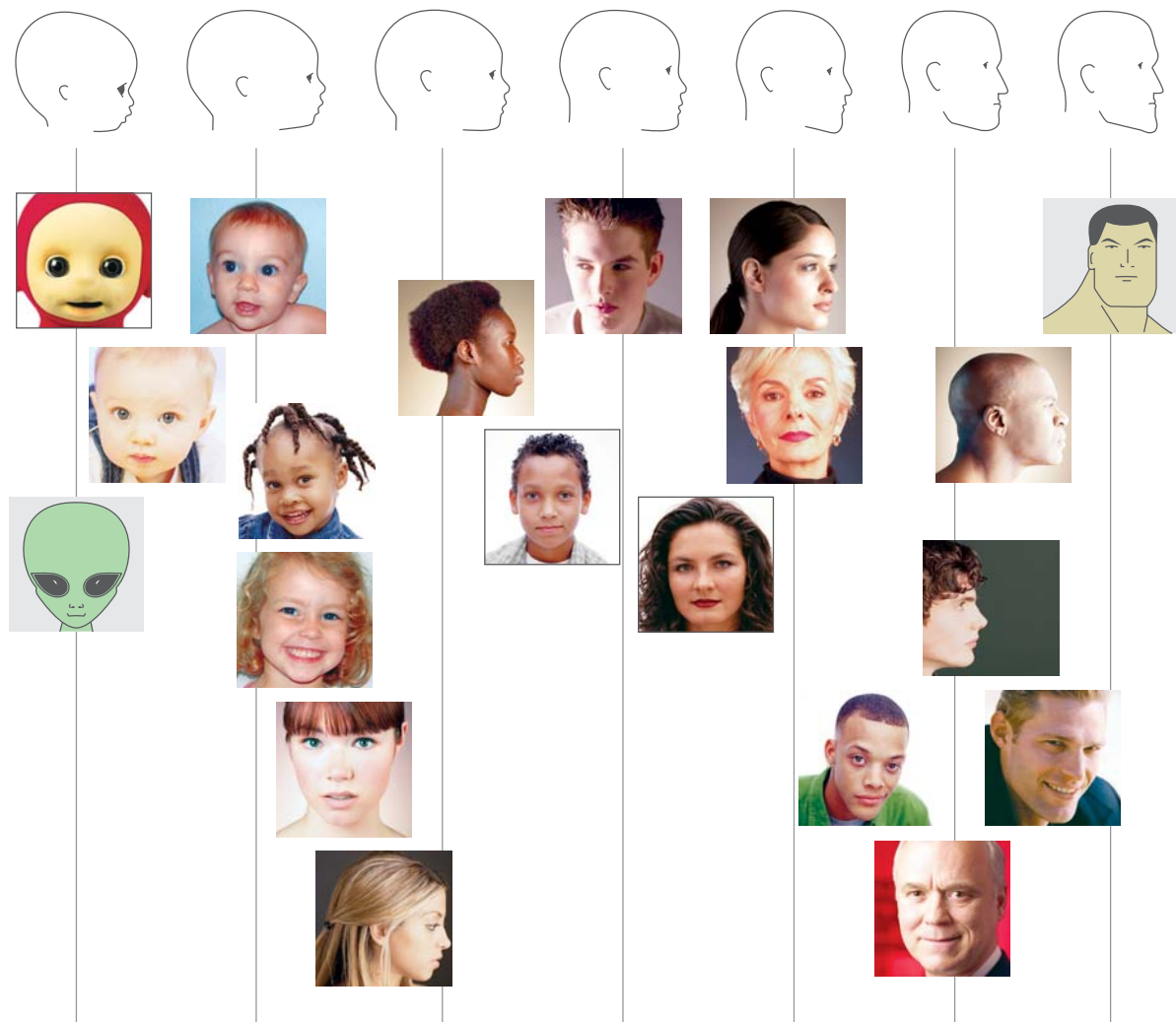
Baby-faced adults are subject to a similar bias. However, unlike with children, there are liabilities to being a baby-faced adult. Baby-faced adults appearing in commercials are effective when their role involves innocence and honesty, such as a personal testimonial for a product, but ineffective when their role involves speaking authoritatively about a topic, such as a doctor asserting the benefit of a product. Baby-faced adults are perceived as simple and naïve, and have difficulty being taken seriously in situations where expertise or confrontation is required. In legal proceedings, baby-faced adults are more likely to be found innocent when the alleged crime involves an intentional act, but are more likely to be found guilty when the alleged crime involves a negligent act. It is apparently more believable that a baby-faced person would do wrong accidentally than purposefully. Interestingly, when a baby-faced defendant pleads guilty, they receive harsher sentences than mature-faced defendants—it seems the contrast between the expectation of innocence and the conclusion of guilt evokes a harsher reaction than when the expectation and the conclusion align.

Consider the baby-face bias in the design of characters or products when facial attributes are prominent (e.g., cartoon characters for children). Characters of this type can be made more appealing by exaggerating the various neonatal features (e.g., larger, rounder eyes). In marketing and advertising, use mature-faced people when conveying expertise and authority; use baby-faced people when conveying testimonial information and submissiveness.

See also Anthropomorphic Form, Contour Bias, Attractiveness Bias, Mimicry, and Savanna Preference.

¹ The seminal work on the baby-face bias is “Ganzheit und Teil in der tierischen und menschlichen Gemeinschaft” [Part and Parcel in Animal and Human Societies] by Konrad Lorenz, *Stadium Generale*, 1950, vol. 3(9).

² See *Reading Faces: Window to the Soul* by Leslie A. Zebrowitz, Westview Press, 1998. There are many other factors that could account for this statistic. For example, the level of care and frequency of crying in premature babies is significantly higher than for normal-term babies, which could contribute to the stress of the caregiver.



Baby-face characteristics include round features, large eyes, small noses, high foreheads, and short chins. Superneonatal and supermature features are usually only found in cartoon characters and mythic creatures. Baby-face features correlate with perceptions of helplessness and innocence, whereas mature features correlate with perceptions of knowledge and authority.