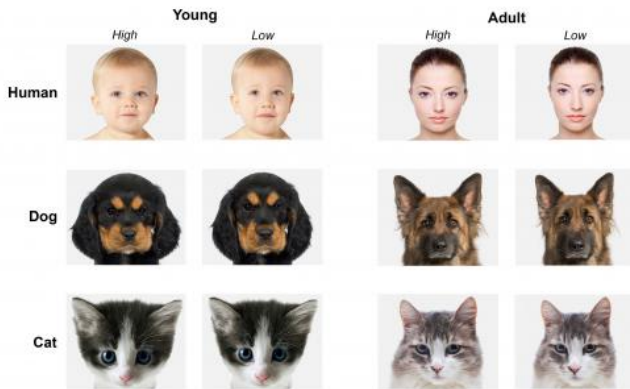


# Children as young as three recognise 'cuteness' in faces of people and animals

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Baby schema adults and babies

(Medical Xpress)—Children as young as three are able to recognise the same 'cute' infantile facial features in humans and animals which encourage caregiving behaviour in adults, new research has shown.

A study investigating whether youngsters can identify baby-like characteristics – a set of traits known as the 'baby schema' – across different species has revealed for the first time that even pre-school children rate puppies, kittens and babies as cuter than their adult counterparts.

The discovery that [young children](#) are influenced by the baby schema – a round face, high forehead, big eyes and a small nose and mouth – is a significant step towards understanding why humans are more attracted to infantile features, the study authors believe.

The baby schema has been proven to engender protective, care-giving behaviour and a decreased likelihood of aggression toward infants from adults.

The research was carried out by PhD student

Marta Borgi and Professor Kerstin Meints, members of the Evolution and Development Research Group in the School of Psychology at the University of Lincoln, UK.

Marta said: "This study is important for several reasons. We already knew that adults experience this baby schema effect, finding babies with more infantile features cuter.

"Our results provide the first rigorous demonstration that a visual preference for these traits emerges very early during development. Independently of the species viewed, children in our study spent more time looking at images with a higher degree of these baby-like features.

"Interestingly, while participants gave different cuteness scores to dogs, cats and humans, they all found the images of adult dog faces cuter than both adult cats and human faces."

The researchers carried out two experiments with children aged between three and six years old: one to track eye movements to see which facial areas the children were drawn to, and a second to assess how cute the children rated animals and humans with infantile traits.

Pictures of human adults and babies, dogs, puppies, cats and kittens were digitally manipulated to appear 'cuter' by applying baby schema characteristics. The same source images were also made less cute by giving the subjects more adult-like features: a narrow face, low forehead, small eyes, and large nose and mouth – making this study more rigorous than previous work.

The children rated how cute they thought each image was and their [eye movements](#) were analysed using specialist eye-tracking software developed by the University of Lincoln.

The research could also lead to improved

education in teaching children about safe behaviour with dogs.

Professor Kerstin Meints, Professor in Developmental Psychology at Lincoln's School of Psychology, supervised the research.

She said: "We have also demonstrated that children are highly attracted to dogs and puppies, and we now need to find out if that attractiveness may override [children's](#) ability to recognise stress signalling in dogs."

"This study will also lead to further research with an impact on real life, namely whether the 'cuteness' of an animal in rescue centres makes them more or less likely to be adopted."

This research was published in the scientific journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

**More information:** Borgi, M., Cogliati-Dezza, I., Brelsford, V., Meints, K., Cirulli, F.: "Baby schema in human and animal faces induces cuteness perception and gaze allocation in children": *Frontiers in Psychology* 5:411. [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00411](#)

Provided by University of Lincoln

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