

Is There Something Wrong With Telling Your Kid They're Beautiful?

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A recent op-ed in the *New York Times* suggests that being dishonest with children about ugliness (their own or others') does them a disservice—some people are just better looking, so why not tell it like it is from an early age? It's an interesting theory, but a tricky one to apply in real life.

Writing at *The New York Times*, Julia Baird **notes** that parents spend an inordinate amount of energy with children “ironing out” differences in appearances, playing up someone’s personality when they are plain, or finding kinder language when they are fat. This is a disservice because, Baird argues—and she draws on the work of the disfigured Australian author Robert Hoge to do it—kids *know* looks matter. We should stop pretending otherwise.

Baird tells Hoge’s story of disfigurement at birth; he was left in the hospital for weeks because his family did not even want to claim him. But Hoge went on to be a top-tier political adviser. The moral is clear: looks are something, but not everything. She writes:

So how is a child to grapple with the savage social hierarchy of “lookism” that usually begins in the playground, if adults are so clumsy about it? The advantage of beauty has been long established in social science; we know now that it’s not just employers, teachers, lovers and voters who favor the aesthetically gifted, but parents, too.

We talk about body shape, size and weight, but rarely about distorted features. And we talk about plainness, but not faces that would make a surgeon’s fingers itch.

It’s worth noting that disfigurement of this kind is extreme, and when children encounter it, it warrants a far more complex, nuanced conversation about how people with various disabilities move through life and triumph in spite of certain setbacks.

But yes, kids are aware of looks. I am already hearing 5-year-old girls battle over who’s prettier, and it’s certainly disheartening, not to mention a bit more difficult than you’d expect to parse out guidance. Kids absolutely do know looks matter, and they absolutely shouldn’t be told they don’t. And yes, you should also explain that there are a number of other traits we admire in others that also matter, from smarts, to athletic prowess, to sense of humor, and most importantly, kindness.

But this is a world apart from saying “some people are just ugly.” Because that’s not really true, either. “Ugly” is a perfect word to describe behavior of a certain kind, but it’s a terrible word to describe people. It’s a value judgment that suggests there’s such a thing as objective beauty when anyone who has been alive for two seconds knows that for every type of person there is another type of person who finds them attractive. That one woman’s sigh is another woman’s yawn, as the saying goes.

When parents emphasize that looks don’t matter, they may be staving off an inevitable realization society will rudely disrupt, but I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing. Children will learn that Santa doesn’t exist, that people die horrible deaths for no apparent reason, that some people just won’t like you no matter what you do. But we tend to try to finesse these lessons in an age-appropriate way. Often, the best way to do so is when the child notices and

needs explanation. And that is when you can talk not about the fact of someone's beauty or someone else's lack thereof, but of the way we *value* it. How it is perceived. How complicated it is, and how subjective.

That said, most people truly think their own children are beautiful. Kids can and will be cruel, but there's perhaps nothing crueler than the parent who would tell their own child they are ugly. You need not pretend there is a 'special beauty' that doesn't exist (though how would you know? Many supermodels have cruel anecdotes from childhood about being teased mercilessly for their awkward, gawky frames and alien-esque faces, only to go on to define a kind of cultural beauty), but part of giving a child unconditional love is embracing however they look as beautiful.

Yes, the world may disagree. But for most of our purposes, we're dealing with a world that prioritizes some very narrow definitions of beauty, but much more wildly inclusive ones in real life. Flip through a magazine or watch any movies, television or commercials and you'll find a fairly anesthetized view of what's attractive. But look at people and how they actually pair up in the world and you'll see that we all seem to find our way just fine, plain as we are.

Photographs of "freaks" by artists like [Diane Arbus](#) or [Shelby Lee Adams](#) show that even what we'd think of as "ugly" can be completely mesmerizing. So as we move through the world, not only is our idea of our own beauty upended at every turn, but so is our idea of beauty in general. The beauty of aging, the beauty of plainness, crookedness, strangeness, and so on—the longer you spend on earth, the more you accept humanity for its so-called flaws.

So yes, tell your child he or she is beautiful. Although society will undoubtedly shred that, just as it shreds even the most beautiful person's notion of themselves, you have still done your job: given them the love that allows them to go into the world and face it, head-on.