

Pretty is as Pretty Does

My wife and I have friends who have chosen to raise cats and dogs, not baby humans. The wife in the couple, who just happens to be a comedy writer, often tells parents of human children that she doesn't understand why parents today believe raising kids is so difficult. She quips: "What is the big deal, just keep them indoors, spay or neuter them before they are six months old, keep the fleas under control and give them lots of brushing and they will turn out great."

Now to be sure, some of that advice does apply to children, especially the part about the fleas. OK, you laugh, but what parent hasn't had to grapple with the note from school about head lice? Head lice are kind of like fleas. But one subtle difference between children and pets is that pets are not that interested in beauty. Please listen carefully: How your child looks will influence her personality, her grades, her job success, her happiness, and yes, even her health.

Children between one and five *hours* old, I said HOURS, when shown two photographs, one of a beautiful person and the other of an unattractive person, will spend 80% of their time gazing at the beautiful person.

Teachers treat attractive children differently, and not always for the better. Pretty little girls get all the attention, a fact not lost on other little girls not so pretty. The pretty little girls have no awareness of the fact that people are not really looking at them, so much as they are looking at "it," with "it" being beauty itself. Physical attractiveness often equates with popularity, and popularity often goes to the popular child's head. The

pretty little girl gets all of her attention for free. I mean, she doesn't have to do anything to get it except show up.

Now are you sitting down? Beauty, even in kids, is all about sexuality. When a four-year old boy has a crush on the four-year old pretty girl, that is an expression of budding sexuality. But life is complex, and soon our four-year old suitor learns that he must compete with all the other little boys for the attention of the pretty girl. A lot of this competition plays out in how our children dress, or should I say, how we dress them.

Fashion is all about beauty. Hairstyles, jewelry, and at some point, makeup (ugh) is all about beauty. Parents might do well (I refuse to say should) to consider toning down the influence beauty has on their kids. For example, parents can choose to use caution when referencing their own children's looks. This is harder than one might first imagine, because a majority of parents think their children are attractive, a perception not shared by other parents to the same degree. Instead of beauty or cuteness, reference your children's academic achievements, their values, their beliefs, their fitness, and yes, their hygiene, but leave their looks and their wardrobe out of the mix.

If you are the parent of a child who is not movie star pretty, then remind them ever so gently that popularity can come from getting good grades, being funny, helpful and friendly. If you are the parent of a beautiful little girl, do the same thing, but for different reasons, of course. If you are the parent of a beautiful little boy, help him focus on all the internal character traits that will make him a good man when older. And for those of you who are thinking about raising cats and dogs, please go to the pound and adopt an older ugly cat or dog. The pretty young ones are always adopted first.

Dr. Anthony Napoleon is a licensed medical psychologist. He is an expert on visual image and non-verbal communication. His book on visual image, *Awakening Beauty, an Illustrated Look at Mankind's Love and Hatred of Beauty*, chronicles how children and adults are influenced by beauty. He can be reached at www.napoleonlegal.com and his book is available from www.amazon.com and other leading bookstores.