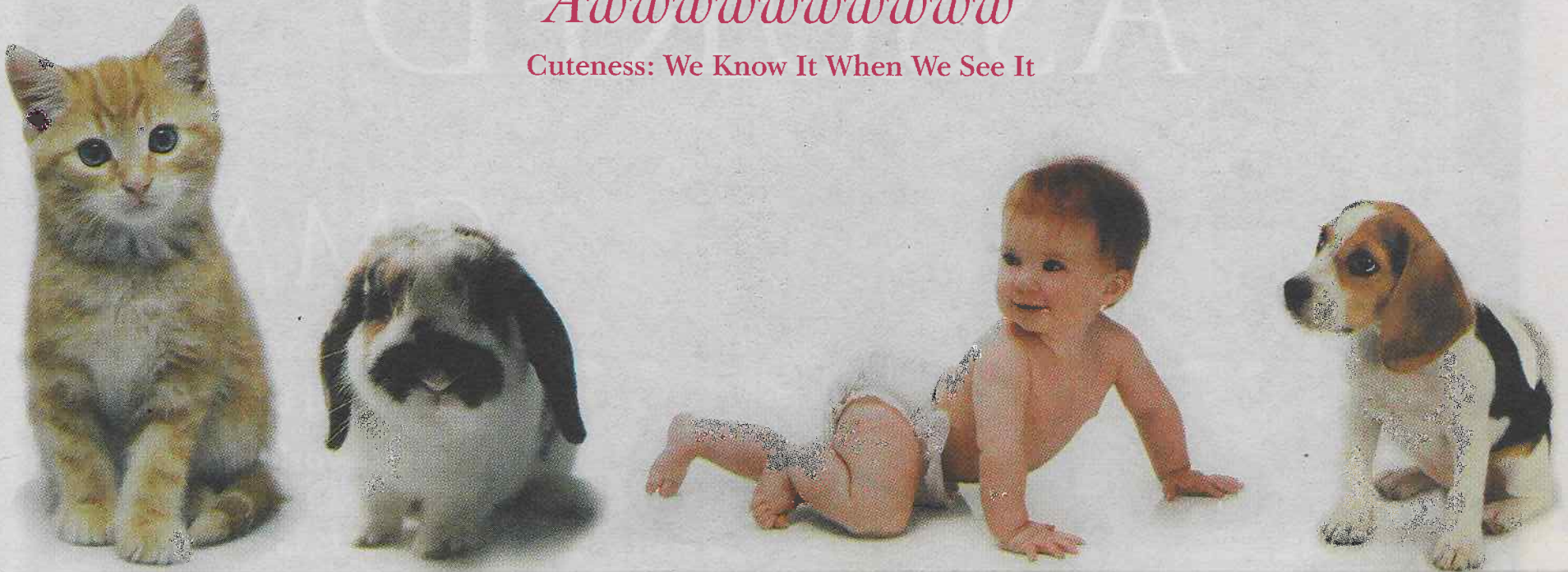


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## Awwwwwwwwww

Cuteness: We Know It When We See It



**S**INCE WELCOMING THE END OF HIBERNATION SEASON a few weeks ago, we have settled in for a time of flowers, puppies, and ducklings. Spring and cuteness are hip these days. Just check out increasingly popular Web sites like Cute Overload, Cute Cats, and the Cute Project or cruise the thousands of videos of playful kittens and rolling hedgehogs on YouTube.

But what is cute?

To answer that, we turned to Katherine Hildebrandt Karraker, a psychology professor at West Virginia University who studies how humans, like all species, are moved to protect the most precious of their offspring rather than, say, eating them.

**Q. What is cute?**

**A.** It's normally been used to apply to physical cuteness, and it normally applies to looking young. Something that really hasn't been studied but that people talk about is cute behavior, which when you are looking at a live bunny or kitten, you're responding to their behavior as well. There has to be the combination of the young behaviors and the young appearance in order for it to be cute.

**Q. So a dead bunny would not be as cute as a living bunny.**

**A.** Right.

**Q. Is there a connection between being small and being cute?**

**A.** That seems to be true, especially when you look at the cuteness of animals and also the cuteness of kids. The smaller ones are often more likely to be described as cute. There have been some studies that show that kids who are perceived as cuter, meaning in a sense perceived as younger, don't have as many expectations placed on them.

**Q. I need to settle a bet. Can you prove scientifically that newborn puppies are cuter than Scarlett Johansson?**

**A.** No.

**Q. Are you sure?**

**A.** You can ask people any question you want to ask them. You could certainly

put a picture of a puppy and a picture of Scarlett Johansson up and say, "Which one is cuter?" And you could get a response, and you could say OK, one of them is cuter than the other. There may actually be some evolutionary benefits to what we call cute. This was proposed long ago by some of the animal ethologists—that the cute features we talk about, the big eyes and so on, might elicit more caregiving behavior from adults.

Just asking

**Q. So say I'm in the savannah, and a lion is bearing down on me and I have a cute kid and a not-so-cute kid, and I can only take one, are you saying...**

**A.** Throw yourself to the lion. You are the least cute of the three.

**Q. As part of your work, you sometimes quantify cute, is that right?**

**A.** Right. We ask people to look at pictures of babies and/or other people and rate how cute they are.

**Q. So then who's cuter, bunnies or kittens? It's bunnies, right?**

**A.** I don't know.

**Q. I thought you said you were an expert.**

**A.** I've never studied bunnies or kittens, but I wonder if you could actually take a photograph and measure the big eyes relative to the size of the face and figure out who's cuter.

**Q. If a bunny is cute and a baby is cute, imagine how cute a mutant half-baby, half-bunny would be.**

**A.** Well, look at some of the pictures that people draw and some of the really funny-looking, completely-outside-the-range-of-normalcy kinds of dolls and pictures of animals and babies in books and things like that. The gigantic cheeks, the gigantic eyes.

**Q. [Pause] Wow, I didn't really expect an intelligent answer to a question like that.**

**A.** Sorry.

—ERIK VANCE