

Why You Want to Eat This Baby Up: It's Science

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One night back in the 1990s, I dreamed that I'd been stabbed in the stomach. When I bolted awake, pain sent me hurtling to the bathroom where I threw up. It felt as if a creature inside my belly was trying to claw its way out.

They couldn't understand. And the truth is, I couldn't either. Why are most people born with the urge that drives them to have children and others, like me, not? I began to wonder if science had an answer.

Anyone who has been on the internet lately knows that cuteness can get weird: lemurs with Keane-painting eyes, infants dressed as peapods, cats with toast on their heads. The internet offers up achingly sweet "cute porn" because those images grab our attention. There's something almost aggressive about the way we crave cuteness.

Several years ago, the actress Leslie Bibb perched next to Conan O'Brien's desk and riffed about a baby so cute that it drove her crazy. She pantomimed her extreme reaction to the infant by gritting her teeth and clenching her fists.

A social psychologist named Oriana Aragón, who was then teaching at Yale, happened to be watching. In the days that followed, she found herself pondering a subject that doesn't usually receive much attention from the scientific community: cuteness.