

“Skin Deep or Deeper?”

by Catherine Oden Fulton, D.D.S.

“Ask a toad what is beauty ... He will answer that it is a female with two great round eyes coming out of her little head, a large flat mouth, a yellow belly, and a brown back.”
— Voltaire

Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but it is equally true that every culture has standards for physical attractiveness—standards that can have tremendous influence in many areas of our lives.

Although we know that it is who we are on the inside that really counts, we cannot dismiss the role outward characteristics—particularly facial features—play in forming personal relationships, being accepted into social groups and opening doors to careers and other opportunities.

This is especially relevant when you consider your child’s future. Whether you like it or not, facial beauty can often mean the difference between acceptance and rejection in many situations. That’s why it is important to know what can be done to maximize the appeal of your child’s facial characteristics.

While we all do what we can to accentuate the positives and play down the negatives of our appearance, there is only so much we can do with what mother nature has given us. Nevertheless, there is something you can do about one of the most important aspects of your appearance—your smile.

When it comes to making a positive first impression, having an aesthetically pleasing face, including an attractive smile, ranks first among all factors. While good oral hygiene is an obvious way to keep your smile’s appearance at its peak, you can take other steps to improve its beauty, as well.

The dictionary defines beauty as “a delightful quality associated with harmony of form.” The word harmony implies balance among different components. This is particularly true in facial beauty, which is largely determined by the proportion and symmetry of facial features. This concept is supported by the facial aesthetics parameters defined by the American Academy of Facial, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons.

Studies have shown that bilateral symmetry—the extent to which your right and left sides match—is an important determinant of facial beauty. Most people judge a bilaterally symmetrical face to be more beautiful than one where one side is slightly different from the other.



Horizontal facial harmony is another factor in facial aesthetics. To determine whether facial features are proportional horizontally, the face is divided into three equal parts from top to bottom. The first third extends from the forehead's hairline to the middle of the eyes. The second third is from the middle of the eyes to the bottom of the nose. The final third is from the bottom of the nose to the chin. The first level of horizontal facial harmony is determined by whether these three areas of the face are equal in size.

The lower third of the face is divided again from the bottom of the nose to the middle of the mouth and from the middle of the mouth to the bottom of the chin. These two areas should also be of equal proportions.

The most common areas of imbalance horizontally involve the maxilla (the bones that form the upper jaw) and the mandible (the lower jaw). The upper jaw may be either too small or too large. If the region from the eyes to the upper lip is too small, the face will appear sunken in and the lower jaw will seem too strong, creating a generally unhappy or sour facial expression. If the upper jaw is too big, the gums will show whenever the lips are parted — producing a “gummy” smile. The technical term for this condition is vertical maxillary excess. Anything more than a little gum showing above the teeth is considered a gummy smile.

Of course, another important factor in the beauty of the lower third of the face is the alignment of the teeth. Again, symmetry is the predominant characteristic of a beautiful smile. Teeth look best when they are straight and properly aligned with each other. There should be no rotations, crowdedness or gaps. Teeth should also be aligned bilaterally so that the midline of the face passes between the two front teeth of the upper and lower jaws.

Understanding the fundamentals of facial beauty is particularly important for parents who have concerns about their child's dento-facial development. Questions often arise when a parent first notices that his or her child has a gummy smile, an overbite or a weak chin, which may be signs that a dento-facial deformity is developing.

Even though the genes we pass on to our children take precedence in physical characteristics such as hair and eye color, body type and so on, parents can make decisions regarding certain facial features that can dramatically change their child's future appearance. In many cases, facial beauty can be enhanced significantly through orthodontics and/or maxillofacial surgical procedures.

As an orthodontist, I am often the first health care professional to analyze how a child will look when he or she grows up. When making decisions about how to straighten a child's teeth, I take into consideration a variety of factors, including both the vertical and horizontal proportions of the face. Sometimes I have to make recommendations that go beyond moving teeth, including treatment to correct skeletal problems.

For example, a gummy smile is caused by a skeletal malformation involving the growth of the maxillary (upper) facial bones. Early intervention is critical in correcting a gummy smile.

Sometimes I can redirect, stunt or encourage bone growth, depending on which is needed to correct the problem. In many cases, the need for a surgical correction can be avoided. If not, I refer the patient to a maxillofacial (oral) surgeon, who adjusts the facial bones further.

Even if surgery is necessary to create the proper balance between the upper and lower jaw, I stay involved in the case in order to prepare the patient for surgery and to straighten the teeth for functional and cosmetic purposes. In fact, the wires and brackets used for these corrections also play a role in correcting the skeletal components of the case. The oral surgeon uses the brackets, bands and wires that I install to move the jaws into the correct position and hold the skeletal parts together during the healing process, which takes four to six weeks.

The highly competitive race for recognition, acceptance and respect that characterizes today's society demands that we maximize every advantage, including our physical attractiveness. This is especially true when we are faced with opportunities such as college admission, social memberships, job interviews and other events that set the course of our lives. A parent's first concern is the content of his or her children's hearts and the quality of their character. However, we must not ignore the importance of their appearance, especially when we can take positive steps to improve it.