

Better Babies Contests in the United States (1908?1916) ^[1]

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Better babies contests were competitions held in state fairs throughout the US during the early twentieth century in which babies between the ages of 6 and 48 months were judged for their health. In 1908, social activist Mary de Garmo established and held the first better babies contest at the Louisiana State Fair in Shreveport, Louisiana. The contests, mirroring theories established in the US's [eugenics movement](#) ^[2] of the twentieth century, aimed to establish standards for judging infant health. Nurses and physicians judged infants participating in the contest on mental health, physical health, and physical appearance. In 1913, the *Woman's Home Companion* (*WHC*) magazine cosponsored de Garmo's better babies contests and introduced the competition to state fairs throughout the US. Better babies contests helped promote routine health assessments of children by medical professionals.

During the late nineteenth century, people in the US began promoting [eugenics](#) ^[3]. Proponents of the movement focused on creating a better populace composed of individuals with traits that they desired, like high intelligence, and without deformities. Supporters of the [eugenics movement](#) ^[2] endorsed programs that claimed to improve, traits that can be passed down from parent to offspring, aiming to amplify the number of individuals with those traits and therefore advance US society. Supporters said that creating a more efficient and able-bodied society would improve the state of the country.

Social policies of the century included policies that attempted to decrease infant mortality rates and to improve adolescent health through baby saving campaigns. Supporters of the campaigns demanded public and government action in preventing the death of children. Those campaigns also promoted laws that required better housing conditions for the public and advocated for more government oversight over child upbringing. Organizations like the Congress of Mothers, headquartered in Washington, DC, argued that promoting better health of infants would help them to grow into better adults.

Building on the foundation of the [eugenics movement](#) ^[2] of the twentieth century, Mary de Garmo, a former schoolteacher, created better babies contests in Louisiana in 1908. De Garmo participated in civic engagement in the state of Louisiana throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In 1890, she organized the Mothers Union in Shreveport, Louisiana. The [organization](#) ^[4] aimed to improve child welfare by helping mothers in the area to collaborate with each other and offered those mothers tips for raising healthy children. De Garmo later became president of Louisiana's chapter of the National Congress of Mothers. Later called the National Parent-Teachers Association, the National Congress of Mothers brought together mothers, educators, and legislators to create legislation and programs to improve the education of children in the US.

In 1908, de Garmo argued that creating standards for measuring infant health would help mothers to measure their success in raising their children. She proposed better babies contests, contests in which judges would evaluate the health of participating babies and would

reward children for having the best physical and mental health. De Garmo aimed to improve adolescent health by establishing a standard of measuring the health of young children. De Garmo said that focusing on the wellbeing of children as early as possible in childhood would minimize and prevent future health deformities in adults.

De Garmo held the better babies contests at state fairs. State fairs in the twentieth century commonly hosted contests in which farmers and animal breeders competed to raise and grow the best stock and cattle. Livestock competitions held in state fairs encouraged farmers and rural families to take better care of their crops and animals. Since better babies contests operated in the same manner, Mary Watts, another member of the Congress of Mothers who would later introduce better babies contests to the state of Iowa, argued that the competitions would encourage families to raise healthier babies. For those reasons, de Garmo held the first better babies competition in 1908 at the Louisiana State Fair. The competition grew quickly and by the second better babies contest held in Louisiana in 1909, one hundred babies participated.

De Garmo and Jacob Bodenheimer, a pediatrician in Louisiana, created evaluation forms and score cards for judges to rank the health of children participating in the better babies contests. The judges, groups composed of nurses and physicians, judged children between the ages of 6 and 48 months on physical attributes including weight, height, and chest circumference as well as mental capacity and physical appearance. The scorecards relied on metrics of average body properties established by Luther Emmett Holt, a founder of the American Pediatrics Society, headquartered in. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Holt collected and presented data on 100 healthy infants, detailing a variety of body measurements. Holt's findings established body of measurements that de Garmo used to compare the physical traits of infant participants. In order to judge the mental capacities of the infants, nurses and physicians initiated interactive exercises with the infants and judged their responses. An infant's behavior during the examination was evaluated and noted. If the infant seemed nervous or unwilling to cooperate, judges deducted points from the infant's overall score.

Infants participating in the better babies contests were judged on a maximum scale of 1000 points. Judges awarded each infant up to 700 points for physical appearances lacking any visible deformities or impairments. Physicians and nurses awarded a maximum of 200 points for mental and psychological fitness and 100 points for physical measurements including normal height and weight. Infants who scored all possible points were considered perfect babies. The participant with the highest score overall was awarded a trophy that marked the infant's triumph as a better baby. De Garmo and her colleagues offered the parents of losing infants suggestions for raising their child to the standards established by the competition for healthy babies. Those suggestions included a list of foods with nutritional content necessary for small children as well as pamphlets that educated mothers on better adolescent health. De Garmo proposed better babies contests to encourage parents to take pride in raising the best child possible.

In 1913, the *Woman's Home Companion* (WHC) magazine, headquartered in Springfield, Ohio, began to cosponsor and organize better babies contests in numerous locations throughout the US. The *Woman's Home Companion* targeted middle-class American women, reaching over 2.5 million women by 1925. The magazine included anecdotes and suggestions relating to child and home care. The WHC created the Better Babies Bureau in 1913, also headquartered in Springfield. The Bureau assisted mothers in raising better children by

offering helpful advice for improving their child's health. Both *WHC* and the Better Babies Bureau promoted better babies contests by supplying scorecards and detailed instructions for holding better babies competitions to various organizations and state fairs throughout the US. By 1916, over 47,000 infants participated in the *WHC*'s Better Babies Contest, and contests were being held in the majority of states in the US.

In 1916, the Better Babies Bureau recruited statistician Fredrick S. Crum to create a revised score sheet and table of physical standards to be used in future better babies contests. At the time, Crum worked for the Prudential Insurance Company of America in Newark, New Jersey. Using the data from previous competitions, Crum created a table of his proposed ideal physical build of children for each month between the ages of 6 and 48 months. The table included differentiated values for male and female participants. Crum said that judges in better babies contests would make fair and appropriate conclusions if they had height, weight, diameter of chest measurements, and circumference of head measurements for each month age group and gender. The ideal weight and height for a six-month old male under Crum's new standards, for example, was 18 pounds and 26.5 inches. That differed from the standards for a six-month old female, which were 16.75 pounds and approximately 25 inches.

The *WHC* promoted better babies contests through the early 1920s and stressed that raising better babies would lead to a better world. According to the *WHC*, mothers were responsible for maintaining the proper health of their children. The *WHC* and the Better Babies Bureau used the contests to encourage mothers to have their children's health evaluated by medical professionals. Expanding on the better babies contests, the *WHC* held a Better Baby Week each year in which mothers were encouraged to have their children examined and learn the height and weight of their children. Medical professionals could then determine whether a child's development was abnormal and, if so, could take actions to help that child.

Better babies contests continued to grow and change throughout the 1900s. In 1920, better babies contests transitioned into fitter families competitions, which established criteria for the health and success of the whole family. The movement was tied to theories of [eugenics](#) [3], which promoted the prevention of [procreation](#) [5] by unfit members of society. By 1920, better babies contests were less common, and instead, most parents brought their children to the doctor for standardization measurements. Baby saving campaigns continued to promote similar principles as organizations and government policies attempted to educate parents on properly raising healthy children.

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