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,
Sources

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