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Helmet can help shape child's future

People magazine recently ran an article on infant plagiocephaly (that's flatheadedness to you and me) in its Trends section. That's right, a piece about parents struggling with what can be a serious concern was in the same place you usually find stories on airbrush tanning and super-size sunglasses. What's worse, the piece marginalized a treatment to help restore the baby's head shape: molding helmets.

True, sticking a helmet on a newborn to get the shape right might seem extreme at first glance, but the helmets don't weigh much and sometimes an infant's head doesn't reshape properly on its own. But the real irony is this all comes from a publication consistently filled with photos of people who ensure the perfect body with breast implants, Botox injections, liposuction and whatever other nip and tucks suit them.

If society accepts, if not encourages, a woman having her armpit sliced open and a sack of saline stuffed into the gash so she can look "hot," certainly reconstructive measures on developing infants in the name of "normal" shouldn't seem so out of line.

Experts at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in New York estimate one in 60 babies develop plagiocephaly, usually as the unintended consequence of the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation that infants sleep on their backs to prevent SIDS.

Andy Hopkins and Patti Snyder of Jacksonville are the parents of a one-in-60. They noticed that their 3-month-old son, Sam, was developing a flat spot on his head and that his ears and eyes were out of line.

But their pediatrician seemed unconcerned. He said the head would probably return to normal on its own, and if not, he figured Sam's future hairdo would hide any malformation. The pediatrician touched on the option of a corrective helmet, but said it would be bulky and heavy and Sam would have trouble learning to walk with the cumbersome device. It turns out the helmet actually weighs only about

6 ounces.

People's article and, to an extent, Sam's pediatrician seem to dismiss plagiocephaly as a cosmetic issue. Which it totally isn't.

Cosmetic treatment refers to changing the normal body structure. Babies like Sam have an abnormality from external factors. Plus, a misshapen head can lead to vision problems, ear infections, headaches and speech disorders. Not to mention the psychological impact of society's often cruel view of deformity.

Patti Snyder remembers how cruel children were to kids who looked different when she was in school. Lunchroom politics are tough enough, much less the adventures in dating later on, without the burden of a flat head. If she can help her son now, during the narrow window of opportunity she has until his skull is fused permanently, why shouldn't she use the helmet? Would she be able to explain to Sam she chose to hope his head would return to the normal shape, rather than ensuring it did?

Snyder's decision to correct Sam's head shape doesn't make her a perfectionist. She isn't bleaching his tooth and getting him fitted for aqua contact lenses to give him Gerber Baby blue eyes. She is simply being a parent, putting Sam's physical and emotional strength first.

Now that's a trend I can live with.

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