

[CRIME AND PUNISHMENT]



Why Mothers Kill

WHO MURDERS HER OWN KIDS?

"I HAVE NO REGRETS." Casey Anthony wrote these words in her journal after killing her 3-year-old daughter Caylee, prosecutors allege. The Florida case has gained national attention. Prosecutors haven't indicated a motive, but researchers who study filicide suggest a wide range of possibilities.

Every year, there are about 300 such incidents in the U.S., according to Geoffrey McKee, a forensic psychologist in private practice. Mental illness leads some mothers to irrational behavior. Psychotic mothers sometimes believe their children are demons, and depression can lead to filicide-suicide. Psychopathic mothers, without a normal moral compass, kill to fulfill their own needs by, say, collecting life insurance. Vengeful mothers kill to hurt third parties.

Some kill unwanted babies, often after concealing the pregnancy. Other cases involve abuse or neglect. Professors of

psychology and law Michelle Obermann of Santa Clara University and Cheryl Meyer of Wright State have interviewed dozens of women jailed for filicide. As children, most of the mothers experienced sexual and physical abuse—a

pattern continued by their partners. Many were single moms. The interviews suggested they wanted to be good mothers but were sometimes overwhelmed by the responsibility.

The most important protection against filicide is social support. After her husband sued for divorce,

one woman Meyer spoke to decided to kill herself and her children. She mixed poison into the kids' ice cream and was bringing it to them when the telephone rang. It was her pastor, asking how she was coping. She threw the ice cream out.

Perhaps Casey Anthony could have used such a call. She goes on trial for murder in October. —Clayton Simmons

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Barely Legal

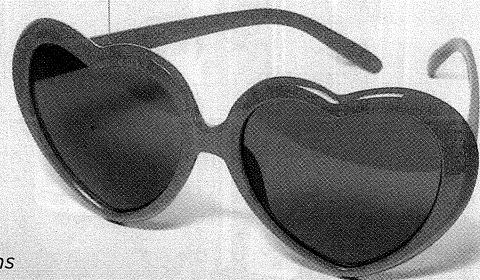
DON'T BLAME AGE-BLINDNESS ON BEER.

PEOPLE TEND TO overestimate the age of teenage girls by a couple of years (and boys by 6 months), a fact that opens the door to excuses for statutory rape. But according to new research, alcohol should not be seen as a mitigating circumstance; being drunk has no effect on men's estimates of girls' ages.

Researchers digitally altered photos of 17-year-old girls to make them look slightly younger or older. Whether inebriated or not, men judged the younger-looking faces to be 18 to 19 and the older-looking faces to be 20 to 21. (Booze also made faces look "prettier"—the beer-goggles effect—but only the older faces, and only those with makeup.)

"Our study implies that alcohol misuse should not be used in a defense plea for statutory rape, or seen as a mitigating factor for judges," says Vincent Egan of the University of Leicester in England. But considering the general tendency to overestimate teen maturity, you're still better off checking your new friend's ID.

—Matthew Hutson



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