

ALL BABIES ARE PERFECT IN THEIR PARENTS' EYES.

But one in 20 babies are born with some kind of ear deformity, ranging from protruding or mis-shaped ears, to ears with too much tissue or none at all.

In most cases, it's a genetic problem – something they have inherited from their parents – which causes an imbalance in the tiny muscles in the ears.

However, ear deformities can also develop in the first few weeks and months of life if they are pushed forward when breastfeeding or by a mattress or head cosy of a car seat.

For a small proportion of babies with serious abnormalities, surgery will be the only option to correct the problem.

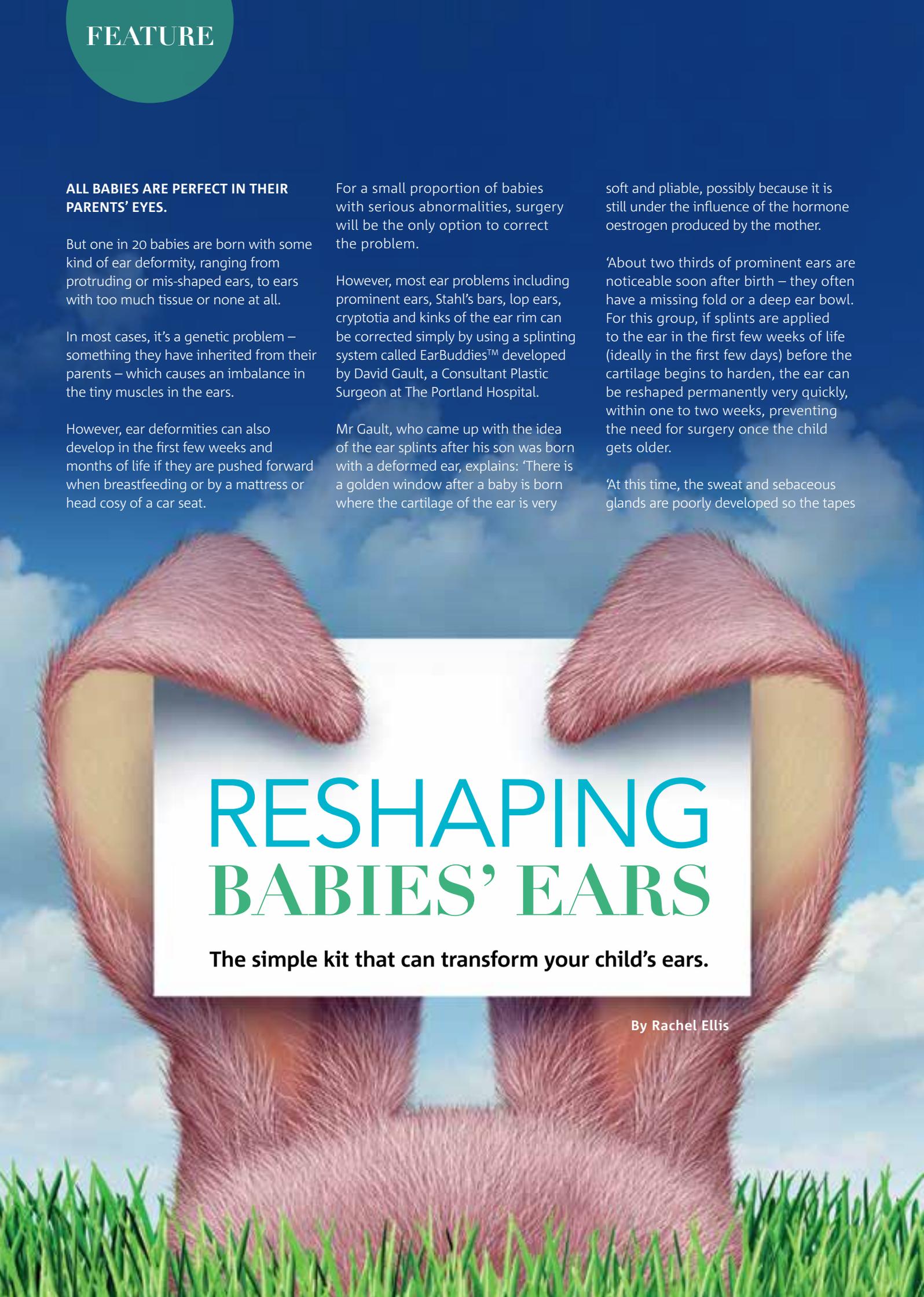
However, most ear problems including prominent ears, Stahl's bars, lop ears, cryptotia and kinks of the ear rim can be corrected simply by using a splinting system called EarBuddies™ developed by David Gault, a Consultant Plastic Surgeon at The Portland Hospital.

Mr Gault, who came up with the idea of the ear splints after his son was born with a deformed ear, explains: 'There is a golden window after a baby is born where the cartilage of the ear is very

soft and pliable, possibly because it is still under the influence of the hormone oestrogen produced by the mother.

'About two thirds of prominent ears are noticeable soon after birth – they often have a missing fold or a deep ear bowl. For this group, if splints are applied to the ear in the first few weeks of life (ideally in the first few days) before the cartilage begins to harden, the ear can be reshaped permanently very quickly, within one to two weeks, preventing the need for surgery once the child gets older.

'At this time, the sweat and sebaceous glands are poorly developed so the tapes

A fluffy pink creature, possibly a sloth or a bear cub, is shown from the chest up, holding a white rectangular sign. The creature has thick, pink, shaggy fur and is looking directly at the camera. The background is a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The creature is standing on a patch of green grass. The sign it is holding contains the main title and subtitle of the article.

RESHAPING BABIES' EARS

The simple kit that can transform your child's ears.

By Rachel Ellis

which hold the splint in place stick well, and the child moves its head little, and does not reach up to the ears to dislodge or pick at the splints, making it an ideal time for treatment.

'The remaining third of prominent ears become obvious around three months of age, as the baby's head shape changes. In this critical period as the cartilage of the ear hardens, even a minor ear protrusion means that they are more likely to be pushed further out from the side of the head, where they will remain forever sticking out, if uncorrected.

'After about three months, the cartilage ceases to be as pliable. Splinting can still work but it can take longer to have an effect.'

The problem, says Mr Gault, is that many parents are told incorrectly by medical staff that protruding or mis-shaped ears will correct themselves naturally or look more normal with age.

'Many parents are told their child will 'grow out of it' but this is completely wrong. That is bad advice,' he says. 'If the problem is not corrected early on, it can mean surgery once the child reaches the age of five which is expensive and like all operations carries small risks and complications.

The child may also get teased at school about their ears. Using EarBuddies™ allows us to fix the problem better than surgery can, correcting the problem permanently and preventing the need for surgery.'

After shaving a small amount of hair around the ear, an EarBuddies™ splint is fitted just inside the rim of the baby's ear and then taped to the head to keep it in place. The splinting system takes no more than 20 minutes to fit and has to be worn between two weeks and four months depending on the age of the child and the severity of the problem. The tapes and the ears must be kept dry for the technique to work properly, and checked regularly.



Elliot before treatment

The kit, including splints, tape and a hat for the baby, can be bought online by parents to fit themselves, but independent research has shown that the results can be improved even more if a healthcare professional is involved.



Elliot with his EarBuddies™ fitted

'We were really made to feel at ease by Rachel, the clinical nurse specialist who fitted the EarBuddies™ - she had a lovely manner with Elliot. He barely noticed they were going on,' says Lisa.

...The ear can be reshaped permanently very quickly, within one to two weeks, preventing the need for surgery once the child gets older.

After 25 years of successful use worldwide, the team at The Portland Hospital has been chosen as the world's first EarPerfect™ Centre of Excellence, offering a fitting service to parents who like the reassurance that the very best is being done for their child.

Lisa, from London, decided to have her second child Elliot fitted with EarBuddies™ at The Portland Hospital's Early Ear Correction Service after she noticed his ears were protruding.

'Although we noticed his ears were a bit sticky out at birth, it wasn't until he was six months old and sitting up on his own that they began to look more prominent,' she says.

'It then took us another few months to feel that we should try to do something about it.'

Elliot was fitted with the EarBuddies™ when he was 11 months old.

Because Elliot was 11 months when he had the EarBuddies™ fitted, he must wear them for four months.

'He has already had them on for two months and I am happy to say we have already noticed a difference. We have re-fitted them once at home in this time and also been to visit Rachel at The Portland Hospital for a re-fitting too,' says Lisa.

'From time-to-time, Elliot does notice them and we have to be careful with getting them wet.

'However, I feel that it is worth it to try to minimise any potential teasing when he reaches school age and also to hopefully prevent him from needing an operation to pin his ears back at a later date.

'Having seen some improvement already we are hopeful that four months will be enough.'

earbuddies.co.uk