

Unborn babies may recognise a face when they see one

By Sarah Knapton SCIENCE EDITOR

BABIES can recognise human faces while still in the womb, new research suggests. Moving images of unborn infants before their birth show they turn their heads towards shapes that resemble faces, with the position of eyes and nose picked out.

However, when they see a random shape, they ignore it, scientists at Lancaster University have found.

The finding suggests the instinct to recognise facial features develops before a baby has even seen its first face.

It also shows that an unborn baby's senses are already well developed and parents should begin interacting with their child while it is still in the womb.

Prof Vincent Reid, a psychologist at Lancaster University who led the research, said: "The foetus in the third trimester actively seeks out information. In our study they had to move their head to keep looking at the face-like stimulus when we moved it away from them. So they are active participants in finding information from the environment. What this means is that other ways of interacting with the foetus can be considered."

The researchers shone dots of light arranged to look like the eyes and mouth of a human face through the uterus wall of 39 expectant mothers who were 34 weeks pregnant. Babies after birth are known to prefer looking at dots of light arranged in this shape.

Their study, which is published in the journal *Current Biology*, showed that when this face-like image was projected through the uterus, the babies turned their heads to look at it.