

Chimpanzees May Recognize Emotions in Others

Study finds as chimps grow, they increase their ability for empathy, learning to recognize the emotions of others

Hello there, and welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English!

I'm Christopher Cruise in Washington.

Today we have news -- a lot of news -- about chimpanzees.

A new study has found that as chimpanzees grow, they can recognize emotions in other creatures, including human beings! We will hear from one of the researchers who led the study, which involved the act of yawning.

"Some people have looked at adult chimps and have shown them cartoons of other chimps yawning, and that sets off their yawning as well. The stimulus -- the yawn stimulus -- can be very simple and still set off a yawn."

Also today, we hear about a study earlier this year that showed chimpanzees, like people, share a sense of fair play.

And we report on plans by America's National Institutes of Health to end medical research on most of the chimps it owns.

"Americans have benefited greatly from the chimpanzees' service to biomedical research, but new scientific methods and technologies have rendered their use in research largely unnecessary."

Finally, we have a report on a new study of wild chimpanzees in Uganda. Researchers found the animals used warning sounds in the same way as humans!

It's all about chimps today on As It Is, VOA's daily show for people learning American English.

Chimps Respond to Human Yawning

A new report says as chimpanzees grow, they increase their ability for empathy -- the ability to recognize emotions in others. Researchers say they learned this by watching some chimps yawn when they see people yawn. Yawning involves opening the mouth while taking a long, deep breath of air. This is usually done when someone is tired or sleepy.

The lead researcher in the study was Elaine Madsen at Lund University in Sweden. She and her team studied 33 orphaned chimpanzees at a wildlife area in the West African nation of Sierra Leone. All of the chimps were between the ages of 13 months old and eight years old. VOA asked Ms. Madsen why she and her team studied contagious yawning.

"I don't know. It's a really peculiar effect. It's such a small thing, but that nonetheless most of us experience. Most of us when we see or hear others yawn or just think about yawning or read about yawning then we ourselves begin to yawn. So it's something that most people are familiar with."

In humans, children begin to yawn when they see other people yawn starting at about the age of four years. This shows they are beginning to

develop empathy. This yawning response -- or "yawn contagion" -- is strongest between people who know each other well.

Elaine Madsen and her team had the chimps watch them as they yawned, opened and closed their mouths in make-believe yawns, and rubbed their noses. The chimps only responded to the yawning, and only if they were at least five years old. Younger animals showed no sign of contagious yawning. So it appeared that empathy develops over the first few years of life.

"Some people have looked at adult chimps and have shown them cartoons of other chimps yawning and that sets off their yawning as well. The stimulus, the yawn stimulus, can be very simple and still set off a yawn. We seem to have this very strong inclination to copy the yawn, whether it's from a cartoon, whether it's another human that the animal sees. I also catch their yawns. It also works the other way around. So very simple stimulus can make us yawn."

Chimps and Humans Said to Share a Sense of Fair Play

Scientists already know that chimpanzees are the animals with genes most like human beings. But scientists now say chimps and humans share a quality once thought to be seen only in people: a sense of fairness.

The finding comes from researchers at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. They had chimpanzees play a game they called "Ultimatum." A chimp would be given a choice. He could either share food with a group of chimpanzees or keep more food for himself.

The researchers say the chimps shared as much food as a group of young children did in a similar experiment.

The researchers wrote about their findings in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. They say the results could help us understand how human behavior evolved over time.

US to Retire Most Chimps from Medical Research

The United States National Institutes of Health plans to end most biomedical research on chimpanzees over the next few years. The NIH will send about 310 chimps to wildlife sanctuaries -- places where they will be cared for. Fifty others will be kept available for important medical studies that could not be performed any other way.

NIH Director Francis Collins announced the decision earlier this year. He said that chimpanzees "deserve special consideration." He added, "I am confident that greatly reducing their use in biomedical research is scientifically sound and the right thing to do."

"Americans have benefited greatly from the chimpanzees' service to biomedical research, but new scientific methods and technologies have rendered their use in research largely unnecessary."

The announcement came two weeks after the Fish and Wildlife Service said all chimps -- not only those living in the wild -- should be considered endangered and given protection.

Animal rights groups have praised the NIH announcement. But it concerned some medical researchers. They warned that it would slow the development of a vaccine for hepatitis C.

The National Institutes of Health has not approved money for new research on chimps since the end of 2011.

Chimpanzees: Alarm calls with “intent”?

Finally, scientists from England have discovered similarities between sounds made by chimpanzees in the wild and human language. The study took place in Uganda.

Researchers from the University of York put a moving snake model near wild chimps and then listened to and watched what the animals did. The researchers found that the chimps were more likely to produce “alarm calls” when other chimps arrived in the area. The research team says the chimps continued to produce these calls until all members of the group were warned about the snake.

One of the lead researchers said the alarm calls were produced to directly warn other chimps about the danger. She said they were not just sounds of fear that many animals make without planning to communicate with other animals. The researchers say the calls were made in the same way that humans make their fears known directly to other individuals.

The research paper was published in PLOS ONE.



And that's our program for today. We hope you enjoyed it, and learned a lot about chimpanzees.

Our program was based, in part, on reporting from VOA's Joe DeCapua. I'm Christopher Cruise.



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