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Does mirror enrichment improve primate well-being?

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Abstract

Primates are highly social animals and appropriate enrichment is required to ensure their psychological well-being. Mirrors are sometimes used as social or sensory environmental enrichment. In this paper we investigate the suitability of mirrors as enrichment for captive primates, by reviewing the literature on mirror implementation in captive primate environments. Mirror-directed responses are mainly social as the mirror self-image is often seen as a conspecific. Although positive exploration and affiliative behaviours are observed, negative aggressive behaviours towards the mirror are most frequently recorded, and abnormal behaviours in primates do not decrease in mirror-enriched environments. There appear to be differences in habituation rates to mirrors amongst primates. While habituation to enrichment is generally perceived to be undesirable, this criterion should not apply when mirrors elicit negative behaviours. Primates that show mirror self-recognition, which are mostly great apes, may be best suitable for mirror enrichment, as they do not perceive the mirror self-image as a threatening conspecific. Increasing the understanding of the reflective properties of a mirror might help primates to understand that the image in the mirror is not real. This could be attained by using small, mobile mirrors. We suggest that mirrors can make decent primate enrichment if the primate understands its reflective properties, which should be evaluated on an individual level. Appropriate use of mirrors as sensory enrichment can improve primate well-being and prevent suffering.

Keywords: abnormal behaviour, animal welfare, captivity, self-recognition, solitary, stress