

## 8.4

# Primate behaviour

## The advantages of social behaviour in one type of primate

The primates group includes gorillas, apes, lemurs and many other mammals. You are required to know about the social behaviour displayed by one named primate: the chosen type for this guide is the gorilla. Most primates live in family groups until they reach sexual maturity, and arrange themselves in a **hierarchy**, where different individuals have different statuses roles within the group. This social control protects all members of the group.

### Social organisation in gorillas

Mountain gorillas live in stable groups (called a **troop**) of around ten individuals. This usually consists of one mature **dominant** male, a number of adult females and their offspring. The dominant male protects the other members of the group, leads them in search of food, and is the only male that mates with the mature females. When males reach sexual maturity, they leave the group and live alone, until they are mature enough to attract females of their own. Females may continue to live with the same group or leave to find another group when they reach sexual maturity.



### Social behaviours in gorillas

As with all primates, **grooming** for gorillas is an important social activity. One individual picks the parasites from the fur of another. This occurs between all members of the group, reinforcing relationships between individuals.

Care of young offspring is the role of the mother. During the first five months the infant remains in constant contact with the mother, suckling at hourly intervals. By the age of 12 months, infants will venture as far as 5m from the mother. During this period, the female protects the young gorilla as it learns the social and other skills necessary to live independently. Further learning takes place after the age of two, as juvenile gorillas play together and imitate the adult behaviour of foraging for food. The silverback is important in the development of young gorillas from the age of three to six years, both in terms of protection from older males within the group, and in play as a source of learning new skills.

Communication systems exist. A variety of calls, displays and grunts are used to signal danger to other members of the group, to issue threats to predators or other groups, and in play fighting displays as juveniles learn how to behave as adults. Facial expressions are also important in gorillas and other large primates, especially in terms of recognition of other members of the group.

### The advantages of social behaviour

Many organisms demonstrate social behaviour, from insects, such as bees, to humans. The advantages of social behaviour in primates such as gorillas include:

- Females only give birth to one (or at least very few) infants at any one time, so the maternal care and extensive group protection towards these few young enhances the survival rate
- The young learn through observation of and play with other members of the group – learned behaviour is vital to the survival of primates
- Knowledge and protection of food sources is shared with the group members
- Greater ability to detect and deter predators is achieved by groups individuals working together