

# How to behave at a zoo – according to science

October 17 2017, by Samantha Ward

---



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

With October half-term approaching, millions around the world will head to their local zoo to indulge in the Halloween activities and get a little fresh autumnal air in the presence of some extraordinary animals. At this time of year, the animals are still wonderfully active and there's plenty to see and do. But there are certain things you should be doing as a visitor to ensure that the animals are able to act as naturally as possible within their environments.

With advances in zoo enclosure design, there are now more opportunities for you to get up close and personal with the more exciting [animals](#), with walk-through exhibits and animal feeding sessions. In zoos, animal welfare research is carried out frequently to ensure the animals' lives in captivity are at their best – and we now understand the impacts that human-animal interactions have on the animals housed in them.

[Research](#) has shown that zoo animals are able to tell the difference between unfamiliar (visitors) and familiar (keepers) people and that, in some cases, visitors can have a [negative impact on them](#). For example, increased visitor numbers have been associated with increased levels of aggression in mandrills, mangabeys, and cotton-top tamarins (monkeys), more time spent alert towards visitors in sika deer, gorillas and Soemmerring's gazelle, less time visible to the public in jaguars, orang-utans and siamangs, and increased stress hormones (glucocorticoid concentrations) in spider monkeys, blackbuck and Mexican wolves. This can be managed by responsible zoos, but everyone must play their part.

Research has also shown us that [keeper-animal interactions](#) have a positive impact on the animals' behaviour. This should always be kept in mind.

The following tips will help ensure that you don't disturb the animals and have a [negative impact](#) on their behaviour.

## **What you need to know**

There is growing evidence to show that [excessive noise levels](#) cause stress in animals and so when you are around the animals in their enclosures, try to be as quiet as possible.



Don't crowd them out.

Many animals, including great apes, such as gorillas and chimpanzees, are also extremely [receptive to eye contact](#) as it is a form of communication between individuals within the social group. This may make them sit with their backs turned – and can make them less likely to engage with you. Try not to stare at the animals if they are facing you – and avoid shouting or banging the glass to get their attention. Respect the animal's privacy and space.

Animals in the wild are always more cautious when they have young. In



zoos, baby animals are very popular, which encourages more visitors and heightened reactions from the crowds. Currently, there is no research investigating the impacts of visitors on the mother-infant relationship but it is crucial to respect the animals even more just in case there are negative implications.

The animals are likely used to their enclosure and the continuous stream of visitors surrounding it, so they might not notice you as an individual. But this does not mean that you should try to encourage them to do so by throwing food or other objects into the enclosure that have not been provided by the zoo keepers. These can cause the animals serious dietary problems. Zoo animals are on a carefully measured and specific diet and other food can be detrimental to their health and welfare.

## **Safety first**

[Health and safety in zoos](#) is paramount. The barriers and windows are there for both your and the animals' protection. Zoos now use a variety of designs so that you can view the animals clearly and take good photos – but if you cannot, never scale the barriers or reach out to the animals and avoid placing children on or over fences. There are a surprisingly [high number of injuries, and worse](#), due to this each year – zoo animals are never tame and should never be treated as such.

Good zoos create educational and engaging signage to educate you during your visit. The signs may be for health and safety reasons or to enable you to learn about the animals in front of you, their wild environment and their conservation status. Signage may also be there to tell you about particular animals who may be shy or nervous or to inform you of [research being undertaken](#). Please pay attention to the signage – it will help ensure that you get the most out of your visit.

Stick to these rules and you can be sure that your trip to the zoo will be

beneficial to the animals, you and your family. Zoo animals are mostly now all captive bred and so are used to being housed in their enclosures and being provided for by their keepers. It is your job as a visitor to respect this, the animals and their homes to ensure that your own behaviour does not negatively affect the animals living there on your visit.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How to behave at a zoo – according to science (2017, October 17) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-10-zoo-science.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.