

Social imitation found in rhesus monkeys

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Italian scientists have provided the first quantitative description of neonatal imitation in a non-human primate.

The University of Parma researchers say that indicates imitative capacities are not unique to the ape and human lineage, contrary to what was previously thought.

Mimicry exists throughout the animal kingdom, but imitation with a purpose -- matching one's behavior to others' as a form of social learning -- has been seen only in great apes. It's been generally believed monkeys do not imitate in that way.

Pier Ferrari, Stephen Suomi and colleagues explored the possibility imitation evolved earlier in the primate tree by studying neonatal imitation in rhesus monkeys, which split from the human lineage about 25 million years ago. They found rhesus infants can imitate a subset of human facial gestures -- gestures the monkeys use to communicate.

The research appears in the open access journal PLoS Biology.

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