The young Orangutan’s eyes

Dear children,

Look very carefully at the eyes on these apes and monkeys, and then look closely at the eyes of your brother or sister. Can you tell me what is very special about our human eyes, and what makes them so different from the eyes of these apes and monkeys? A clue is to look at the edges of all the eyes. Yes, we have white around the dark circle in the centre of our eyes, and the apes and monkeys don’t.







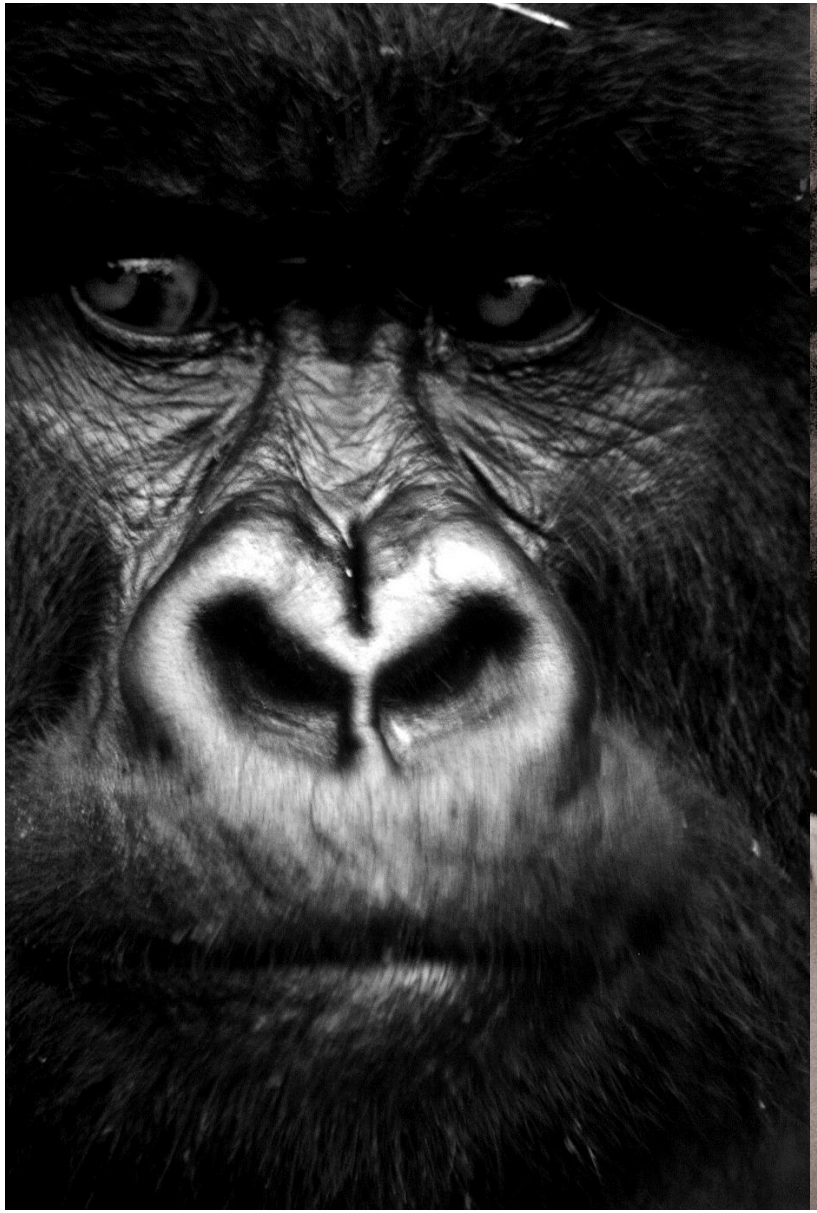


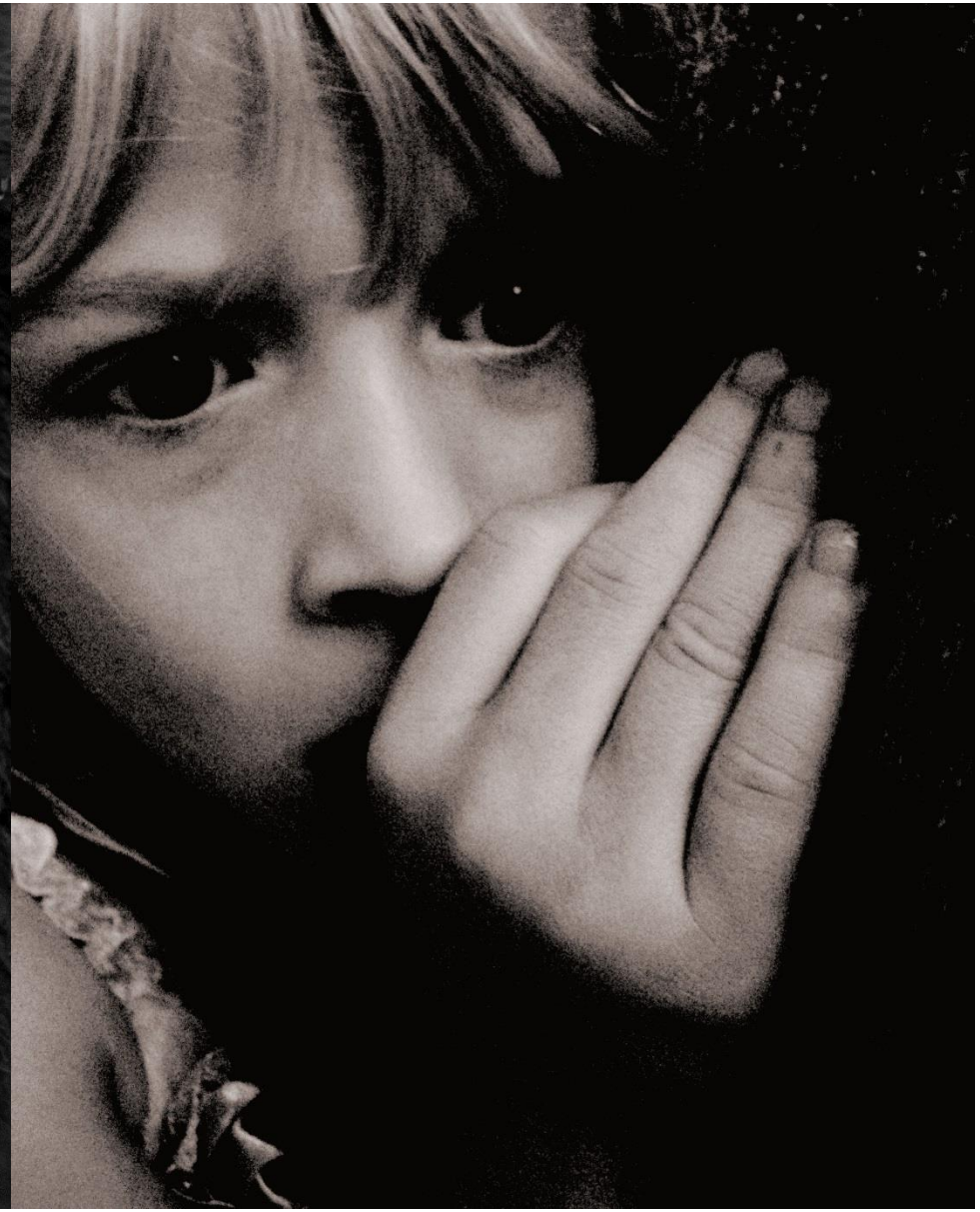
How do you think the white could help us? Yes, it makes the beautiful colours of your eyes easier to see. But there is another reason. The white in our eyes make it easy to see where someone is looking.

Try it: if you keep your head still and look to your side, your brother or sister can easily see that you are looking to the side, because they can see the dark circle in the middle of your eye move across the white background of the eye. Apes and monkeys can’t do this, because they don’t have the white background, and so they can’t see the dark circles in their eyes moving from the middle of the eye to the edge of the eye.



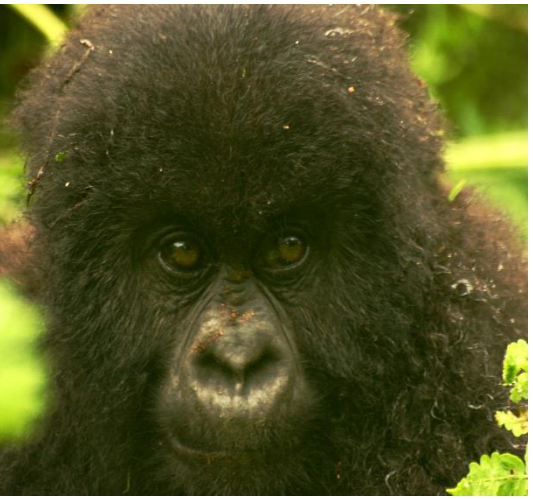
Do you agree that it’s useful for us to know where someone is looking? Can you think of some reasons why? Yes, it’s useful for us to know if someone is talking to us or to the person next to us; and it’s useful to know where someone is looking if they see something dangerous, like a snake, which they don’t want to disturb by shouting out, or running away.





Don’t you think it’s a bit odd that the apes and monkeys in these pictures don’t have white backgrounds in their eyes to help them communicate like this? Although most apes and monkeys don’t have white in their eyes, there is one ape that does, but only for a short time. It’s this ape below. Do you know what it is? Yes, it’s an orangutan.













When young male orangutans are growing up, they spend a lot of time together, competing for food and places to live – so they need to be communicating a lot. At this time of their lives their eyes have white in them just like us! That helps them communicate. But when they get older, they live mainly by themselves and they don’t need to communicate much, and they can’t use the white in their eyes because most of the eye is hidden by folds of skin on their face. Have a look at the folds around the eyes of this old orangutan and the white background of the eyes of this young orangutan.





Isn’t it fun to think that right now there are some young male orangutans – just like the one in this picture – far away in a tropical forest moving the dark circles in their eyes across the white background in their eyes and because of this their friends are able to see where they are looking – just like you can see right now where your brother and sister are looking.

All the best from
the Bio-edge,

Robin

