

# Sixth Form Psychologists at Paignton Zoo

In the Spring Term, the Psychology department took Field Day as an opportunity to take the sixth form psychology groups to Paignton Zoo. It's fair to say that this might raise some eyebrows, but Psychology has a longstanding history of animal research and some of the findings in recent years have opened up our understanding of learning, behaviour, evolution and language acquisition. As a result, Paignton Zoo's education department seemed the perfect location for our visit.

In the morning pupils were given an interactive lecture on animal learning and were given the opportunity to see some of the principles of behaviourism in action. Behaviourism is one of the oldest perspectives in psychology and while it has gone out of fashion with advancements in Cognitive psychology and a more holistic understanding of the human mind, it can still be found applied to certain areas of relevance.

Paignton Zoo utilises behaviourist principles of classical conditioning (learning by association) and operant conditioning (learning through reinforcement and punishment) to optimise the experience and the health of animals



in their care. This gave our psychologists the opportunity to see how a well known psychological theory has been applied in the real world.

After the lecture the group had their lunch where they were unfortunately descended upon by a peacock looking to impress. Unfortunately, this was not to be met with positive response.

In the afternoon the pupils explored the zoo, but not without completing an observation task of their own. They were asked to pick a



social animal and make note of the behaviours that they showed. Interestingly, observational techniques are not as easy as you might think and without others at your side to verify or deny a behaviour took place, it can be difficult to tell what is actually happening. Some of the upper sixth students certainly got a fright from the gorillas, which we had been told earlier in the day by our lecturer, had a habit of running and jumping at the glass. And the reason for this? Like us, they don't like being stared at.

EVW

