Arboreality and infant behavioral development: new data from wild blue monkeys

Steffen Foerster, Marina Cords

Columbia University, Department of Ecology, Evolution & Environmental Biology

Infant behavioral development has been little studied in wild arboreal monkeys. To test the hypothesis that development of independence is delayed in arboreal species because of a high risk of injury from falling, we studied 12 infant blue monkeys during the first six months of life in the Kakamega Forest, Kenya. Blue monkey infants developed spatial independence from the mother rather rapidly. By the end of the second month some infants already spent less than 50% of their time in contact to the mother, a figure that decreased to an average of 35% in the third month, and to about 3% in the sixth month. Interindividual differences were small, and significant only for infants of primiparous vs. multiparous mothers. A comparison of mother-infant contact scores with those from similarly sized terrestrial species does not support the hypothesis that arboreality delays the development of spatial independence. In fact, blue monkey mothers ceased to restrict the independent movements of their infants very early in life, at an age of about two weeks, and most of our infant subjects did fall out of a tree at least once without sustaining serious injury. These observations, and a comparison of our results with those from wild *Macaca fascicularis*, another highly arboreal species, suggest that the development of infant independence reflects the risk of intra-group aggression and predation more than arboreality.