Center reflects on chimp knowledge

By ANGELA SIMONEAUX
Acadiana bureau

NEW IBERIA — If you put a 2-year-old child in front of a mirror, she will probably recognize herself.

So will a 2-year-old chimpanzee. When the human child recognizes herself, it may be a big deal for her parents, but it won’t make the evening news.

But for chimpanzees, the mirror test is making headlines.

Researchers have only begun to scratch the surface of chimpanzee development. Some of that research is being done by Daniel Povinelli, 29, at the University of Southwestern Louisiana’s Primate Research Center.

Povinelli is comparing the mental growth of children and primates.

Once all the questions are answered, Povinelli may have a better idea of how close humans and chimps are.

“We’re trying to understand where humans and chimps differ in the ways they think,” he said.

Povinelli’s research has been featured in a documentary produced by the British Broadcasting System, and in a video produced by USL’s News Services Department.

That video included a number of research experts who commented on Povinelli’s work, such as Gordon G. Gallup Jr., a psychology professor at New York State University.

He wrote that Povinelli’s work “has important theoretical and applied implications” in the field of child psychology, and may even provide researchers with information to solve the problems of autism and clinical disorders like schizophrenia in humans.

“Current research being conducted by Dr. Povinelli and his colleagues at the New Iberia Research Center has already attracted considerable national and international attention,” Gallup wrote.

Povinelli has been working three years at the center, since receiving his Ph.D. from Yale.

“Most of my work is to determine where the similarities and differences between human development and chimp development are in terms of their understanding.
Chimp

CONTINUED FROM 1B

of themselves," Povinelli said.

We know that human children begin to recognize themselves in a mirror at about 18 to 24 months, he added. That's when they begin to recognize that they are a person.

But when do chimps reach that realization, and how firm is the realization? Those are some of the questions that Povinelli wants to answer.

Researchers use simple games that children and chimps can play, and their behavior reveals their answers, Povinelli explains.

For instance, Povinelli said, one can determine that a human child recognizes himself in the mirror by placing a sticker on his head when he's not looking. When the child looks in the mirror, he can tell the researcher he knows that image is his if he reaches up to his own head to see if there is a sticker on his hair. Povinelli says. Younger children will often reach for the mirror to retrieve the sticker. That means they don't realize the mirror is showing them their own image, he said.

"We're trying to determine the major landmarks in their understanding of themselves and their understanding of other peoples minds," Povinelli said.

Chimps are one of the very few animals that do recognize themselves in mirrors, he notes. "That shows they have a high level of concept of self," he said.

The primate center is one of five chimpanzee-breeding programs in the United States. It is sponsored through the National Institute of Health, and is 27 years old. Chimps and other primates have been bred there for more than 20 years. The center became part of USL 10 years ago, with an 18-member staff and an $800,000 budget. Last year, the center had 84 employees and a budget of $4.3 million.

The chimps Povinelli works with at the center are 5 and 6 years old.

Watching a chimp recognize himself in the mirror is illuminating, he said, but it only tells you so much, Povinelli said.

"It doesn't tell us what they know," he said. "How can we ask them if they know what the past is, what the future is? Do they see themselves as an entity that endures through time?"