

Grades: 6-8

Koko – The Gorilla Who Talks

In 1971, Penny Patterson, a graduate student at Stanford University, met Koko, a newborn gorilla in the San Francisco Zoo. Penny had grown up wanting to communicate with animals and decided to teach Koko sign language in hopes of finally crossing the boundary between animals and humans. However, what started out as a scientific experiment evolved into a love story that, for almost half a century, has both challenged the way we think about animals and changed the course of many lives. After 44 years, Project Koko is the world's longest ape-language study and, according to Penny, the most successful, with Koko mastering hundreds of signs. After a lifetime together, Penny and Koko share a bond similar to that of a mother and daughter. Early on, their relationship survived the San Francisco Zoo's attempts to reclaim Koko, ejection from the university where Penny gained her PhD, and skepticism from parts of the scientific community, which began to doubt the validity of Penny's claims. Like any mother, Penny fought for Koko at every turn. This is the unique story of the life-long relationship between scientist Penny Patterson and Koko the gorilla.

After watching this episode, choose from the following questions and/or tasks to extend your learning

Question Box 1

- Who is Koko, what is her real name, and what is its significance?
- Who is Penny Patterson, and why is she interested in working with Koko?
- How does this work break the stereo-type of gorillas as “slow, stupid apes ambling through the forests?” (*ELD*) *The word stereotype means an idea of a particular type of person or thing. In this case gorillas were thought of as slow and stupid. How does this change in the video?*
- What is the new perspective that others formed as Penny and Koko's work became a media sensation?
- Koko surprised observers by using the signs for “eat,” “drink,” and “more.” What other signs became part of her vocabulary? How many words did she learned
- Creativity is not just for humans, how does Koko satisfy her creative urge?
- How did the ability to communicate with Koko show that animals have a wide range of emotions?
- How was Penny and Koko's relationship an example of bridging gaps?
- Koko had a long and good life, tell how her life was meaningful to others.

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Question Box 2

- It was supposed to be a short-term research project.
- How did it become a lifetime of learning?
- And, along the way, did people learn to see gorillas in a whole new light?

Question Box 3 (Tasks)

- Research: What are the benefits to interspecies communication?
- <https://www.koko.org/communication/>
- Size Comparison Activity
 1. Using 5 basic measurements of your body, compare your size to the size of the animal in the Nature episode. If you are watching multiple episodes this week, create a table to record all of your discoveries. Use the following measurements: height, weight, arm length, waist circumference, foot length. Some animals may not have the same features. Adjust as necessary. Extension: Using the length of the animal you are exploring; can you find something in your home, or that you are familiar with to make a comparison? *For example: A blue whale can be 80-110 feet long, that is more than two big yellow school buses. (ELD) Use words to compare such as: whereas, while, compared with, in comparison.*
- Why was it important to become the “face of gorillas” which were quickly becoming an endangered species? (ELD) **Write** a short paragraph to justify why it is important to become the face of gorillas. Use “I think ___, In my opinion, ___, or In my perspective, ___.”

Question Box 4 (Enrichment)

Learn more about Koko: <https://www.koko.org/kids4koko/>

1. Sign Like Koko
 2. Paint Like Koko
 3. Read About Koko (ELD) *Read orally to your family*
 4. Learn About Gorillas
- Read about how the work continued with two more gorillas, Micheal and Ndume <https://www.koko.org/communication/>
 - Watch more about Koko <https://www.youtube.com/user/kokoflix/videos>

Question Box 5 (Extend/Real-Life)

- Watch Koko meet her new kittens in a series of videos at: <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/69944/watch-koko-gorilla-meet-her-new-pet-kittens>
- Think about the importance of relationships. Who do you have an important relationship with? How can you continue to foster and grow that relationship? (ELD) *Name three ways on how you can foster relationships. Use this language: There are three ways that I can foster relationships. One way is ___, Another way is ___, and lastly ___.*
- **Social – Emotional Connection:** Building and having relationships in our lives is an

important part of who we are. Think about a person you have a strong relationship with. Write in your journal three things about that person that makes them important to you.

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Write a sentence about why you are grateful for having them in your life.

- Put yourself in Koko's place learning a new language. Watch this YouTube video: <https://youtu.be/DaMir4AfYA0> and participate in the lesson (with a friend or family member if possible).
 - What difficulties did you experience doing this lesson?
 - How did the instructor help you understand the language without speaking?
 - What does this experience teach you about the importance of communication?
 - How patient were you in learning the material?