

Kids and Animals Engage in Play. Does it Have Greater Value?

Research and Revelations Continue

Kids love to play and sometimes play with animals. Picture the typical game of chase children might engage in, and then add a dog to the mix and you'll witness joy, enthusiasm, laughs and a rousing good time being had by all. What's interesting is that in observing creatures in the wild, many species also take the time to play. In a world where play is in jeopardy giving way to many societal pressures, the animals of the world might just have a worthy lesson for us all on whether play is indeed important.

Parents of children with special needs are often under a lot of pressure to make sure their child is given all the opportunities they can to grow, learn, develop and succeed. Play might not even make the list of items the child needs to participate in according to a parent's list of priorities. But that viewpoint might need some consideration. Scholarly research and theories continue to emerge on why animals play. This is an area that might provide unconvinced parents with some evidence on the true value of play.

Why might it be important to study animals at play and what does that have to do with children? The simple answer is that if play has biological roots in a wide array of species, perhaps our impulse to play occupies a more important place in the lives of children than we realize. And by studying animals at play we might be able to understand play's role and appeal to humans more broadly.

"Scholars interested in play in humans should take note of the growing literature on play in other species..." So opens the article by Gordon M. Burghardt where he integrates research on play for children with research on animals that play.

Burghardt's article that appeared in *The American Journal of Play*, entitled, "The Comparative Reach of Play and Brain, Perspective, Evidence, and Implications," points out that, "... play as a topic has not been at the forefront of evolutionary thinking. Yet, if animal play has any implications for those who focus on play in *Homo sapiens* (humans), an evolutionary approach needs to be taken seriously."

One of the first pieces of literature on the relationship between animal play and play among humans was written 1898 in a book entitled, "The Play of Animals." German psychologist Karl Groos took inspiration from Charles Darwin's work and proposed the theory that play is a preparation for later life. He suggested that animal play is driven by their basic instincts to survive. Groos' asserted that, "... instead of saying, the animals play because they are young, we must say, the animals have a youth in order that they may play."

Another question that is implied by Burghardt is, *if play is important to animals, do all animals play?* His article seems to point out that we are discovering more species play than animal researchers were at first even aware of. Sharks, lizards and snakes have been observed in the act of play. Frogs, birds and fish have been characterized as engaging in play. Burghardt even references a species of octopuses, which have, "... been documented performing complex manipulations with LEGO blocks and using their water jet abilities to repeatedly bounce floating balls."

So parents, especially those of children with special needs, need to take a page from practices of other species that have evolved with and engaged in play as part of their means of survival. The good news is that if we follow the paths these animals take and play more, we are certain to, at the very least; provide our children with a valuable and worthwhile lesson.

This article was brought to you by AblePlay at www.ableplay.org, a website for parents of children with special needs to find toys, play products and often a few ideas and inspiration. AblePlay is part of the nonprofit National Lekotek Center, the leading authority on play for children with disabilities at www.lekotek.org.