

Why Pets Play

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Among the joys of sharing our lives with companion animals is watching them play and playing with them. Watching a group of puppies playing or playing with a kitten with a feather is almost guaranteed to put a smile on anyone's face. Just what is play and why do animals do it?

These questions have intrigued animal behaviorists for many years and have generated a great deal of research. We have learned a great deal about how animals play and have developed many fascinating theories about why they play, but there are no simple explanations for the behavior. While it is often easy to recognize play, it has been difficult to come up with a simple definition that applies to all cases. Play seems to be a mix of many different behaviors that together have no real function. Puppies playing together may show elements of prey hunting, sexual behavior, aggression and submission all in the same sequence and none of it seems serious.

Play is common in many species of mammals, from mice to dolphins, but has been most studied in primates such as chimpanzees, carnivores such as cats and dogs and ungulates such as horses and goats. In wild animals, play is much more common in young animals than adults, but in our domestic animals adults may play frequently as well.

Play can be social, involving other animals, or it can be solitary involving manipulating objects or running, jumping, climbing and leaping. Sometimes play can involve all of these at once such as two dogs playing with a stick or a person playing with a cat with a dangle toy. A characteristic of most social play is the occurrence of a special play signal. This is usually a sound the animal makes, a particular posture or a movement that tells the playmate "this is not serious hunting, sex or aggression, it's only play!" For example, dogs have a "play bow" where they stretch out their front legs on the ground while raising their rumps in the air. This is recognized by other dogs as a signal to play. Domestic cats may pounce or use a variation of the play bow, but the signals don't appear as clear as the ones that dogs give us.

Despite years of research scientists still aren't sure about the precise functions of play. Simply arguing that animals do it because it is fun doesn't adequately explain the biological functions or benefits of the behavior. As many as thirty-five different benefits have been suggested for play.

In different species, play may impart different benefits, meaning that play may do something different for dolphins than for mice. Among the most popular theories are that play helps to develop coordination and strength, that it helps to develop specific adult skills like hunting or mating, that it helps animals learn specific social relationships and that it may act like a social glue to help the group stay together.

Next time you see animals play or play with your pets, try to think about it from their point of view. You may come away from it with a new appreciation for your animal. Regardless of the precise reasons for play it is still an activity that is rewarding for both people and their animals.

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