

Name: _____ Class: _____

Play, Play Again

Play puzzles scientists. Why do animals spend time and energy doing silly things that seem to have no purpose?

By Ellen Braaf
2010

Just like humans, animals commonly play with each other, especially when they are young. In this informational text, Ellen Braaf discusses why animals play and the benefits that come with playing.

- [1] The struggle for survival in nature is deadly serious. What place is there for play, an activity that doesn't help animals eat, grow, or reproduce?

And play is risky. Animals can break bones, pull muscles, or get bitten or scratched. Why is play worth the risk? Many scientists believe it's essential for survival — as important as food or sleep. According to animal play expert Marc Beckoff at the University of Colorado, "play is serious business."



"Playing cubs" by Tambako The Jaguar is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0

Getting Ready for the Adult World

Playing lets young animals try out different ways of doing things again and again in a safe environment, where a mistake won't be fatal.¹ Most scientists believe that when animals play, they are practicing skills they'll need later in life. This is why different kinds of animals play in different ways. Young predators, such as wolves, lions, and bears, play by stalking, pouncing, biting, and shaking their heads from side to side. They're honing their skills for when they will run down, catch, and kill prey. When a wolf pup chases its own tail, bites it, and yanks it back and forth, the pup is rehearsing skills it will need one day as a hunter.

Prey animals, such as elk, deer, or antelope, play differently. They dash about like crazy, leaping wildly in the air — twisting, turning, twirling. According to biologist John Byers of the University of Idaho, they act like they have "flies in their brains." But these animals are rehearsing skills they'll need one day to escape predators and avoid becoming dinner.

- [5] During play, animals constantly monitor their behavior to keep play going. If one animal plays too roughly, the play ends. To keep things fun, they often reverse roles. A stronger or dominant animal will lie on its back, assuming a submissive² position, while a weaker animal gets to play "boss."

1. **Fatal (adjective):** causing death
2. ready to yield to an authority figure

Taking Risks

Animals at play are also training for the unexpected. In play, animals learn about the world around them and their own physical limits. The need to test those limits, and experience unpredictable situations, could explain why animals sometimes seem to prefer play that is a bit dangerous.

A study of Siberian ibexes at Brookfield Zoo in Chicago showed that even though half their enclosure was flat and grassy — a perfect place to frolic³ in safety — the young goats chose to play most of the time on a steep, rocky area where they were much more likely to get hurt. Why did they place themselves in danger?

Beckoff believes that such play helps animals develop flexibility — in their minds as well as their muscles — so that they are better prepared to deal with unexpected or uncontrolled events. In the confusion of fleeing a sudden attack by a predator, an ibex may stumble or crash into another member of the herd. But if it has had lots of practice regaining its footing in play, its misstep is less likely to spell disaster.

Playing for Smarts

Research shows that smarter animals spend more time playing. Elephants play more than horses. Wolves play more than rabbits. And parrots play more than ducks or sparrows. Smarter animals also play in more creative and complex ways. Not surprisingly, humans and chimpanzees are among the most playful species.

- [10] Could play actually help the brain grow? Some scientists think so. They believe that play exercises the brain like lifting a weight exercises a muscle. They even call play "brain food." So play on! Your brain will thank you for it.

"Play, Play Again" by Ellen Braaf, ASK, May/June 2010 (text). Copyright © 2010 Cricket Media. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

3. **Frolic (verb):** to play and move about cheerfully

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

- PART A: Read the sentences from paragraph 2 of the passage. "And play is risky. Animals can break bones, pull muscles, or get bitten or scratched. Why is play worth the risk?" How does the author support the idea that play is worth the risk?
 - by showing how play helps animals prepare to survive in their environment
 - by showing how play teaches behaviors that help animals work together
 - by showing how play trains animals to react to unexpected dangers
 - by showing how play provides exercise that makes animals strong
- PART B: Which detail from the passage supports the answer to Part A?
 - "yanks it back and forth" (Paragraph 3)
 - "leaping wildly in the air" (Paragraph 4)
 - "rehearsing skills they'll need one day" (Paragraph 4)
 - "monitor their behavior" (Paragraph 5)
- Which sentence contains two main ideas from the passage?
 - Some animals engage in risky play; goats prefer rugged play areas.
 - Animals develop physical abilities in play; play increases their intelligence.
 - Play is different for various animals; some animals play more than others.
 - Large animals play more than small ones; prey animals play more roughly.
- PART A: Read the sentence from paragraph 3 of the passage. "They're honing their skills for when they will run down, catch, and kill prey." What does the word "honing" mean as used in paragraph 3?
 - demonstrating, displaying
 - identifying, recognizing
 - improving, sharpening
 - changing, reversing
- PART B: Which phrase from the passage best supports the answer to Part A?
 - "try out different ways of doing things" (Paragraph 3)
 - "the pup is rehearsing skills" (Paragraph 3)
 - "animals constantly monitor their behavior" (Paragraph 5)
 - "animals develop flexibility" (Paragraph 8)
- Which sentence describes a way that young prey animals play differently than young predators?
 - Young prey animals injure themselves more often during play.
 - Young prey animals jump and run around more during play.
 - The play of young prey animals includes less role reversal.
 - The play of young prey animals involves more creativity.

- PART A: Read the statement from paragraph 2 of the passage: "play is serious business." Which point is the author supporting with the statement?
 - Play for animals is not filled with fun.
 - Play helps animals learn to survive.
 - Play can be very risky for some animals.
 - Play helps animals communicate with one another.
- PART B: Which TWO sentences from the passage best support the author's point in Part A?
 - "they are practicing skills they'll need later in life." (Paragraph 3)
 - "This is why different kinds of animals play in different ways." (Paragraph 3)
 - "Prey animals, such as elk, deer, or antelope, play differently." (Paragraph 4)
 - "They dash about like crazy, leaping wildly in the air – twisting, turning twirling." (Paragraph 4)
 - "they act like they have 'flies in their brains.'" (Paragraph 4)
 - "But these animals are rehearsing skills they'll need one day to escape predators and avoid becoming dinner." (Paragraph 4)
- PART A: Read the subheading from the passage. "Play puzzles scientists. Why do animals spend time and energy doing silly things that seem to have no purpose?" How does the author answer the question?
 - by providing descriptions of how animals play
 - by providing examples of different animals that play
 - by providing details of research studies on playing animals
 - by providing explanations of how different types of play help animals
- PART B: Which detail from the passage best supports the answer to Part A?
 - "Young predators, such as wolves, lions, and bears, play by stalking" (Paragraph 3)
 - "Prey animals, such as elk, deer, or antelope, play differently." (Paragraph 4)
 - "if it has had lots of practice regaining its footing in play, its misstep is less likely to spell disaster." (Paragraph 8)
 - "Research shows that smarter animals spend more time playing." (Paragraph 9)
- PART A: According to the passage, which is a benefit of risky play for young animals?
 - They can build endurance and speed for long-distance travel.
 - They gain the respect of other animals in their herd.
 - They improve their physical and mental alertness.
 - They can challenge animals in other herds.
- PART B: Which statement from the passage best supports the answer to Part A?
 - "The struggle for survival in nature is deadly serious." (Paragraph 1)
 - "Many scientists believe it's essential for survival — as important as food or sleep." (Paragraph 2)
 - "the young goats chose to play most of the time on a steep, rocky area" (Paragraph 7)
 - "such play helps animals develop flexibility — in their minds as well as their muscles" (Paragraph 8)