

Play is a common behavior shared between mammals, some bird species, and a few other species. At first thought it may seem like it serves no important purpose in the survival of the species, but different types of play have different roles in the development of the individuals and groups. Play helps to establish social hierarchies within animal groups, helps animals develop their motor skills, and it helps animals explore and learn about their environment and hone their hunting skills. So what are some examples of these types of play? Let's get into it.

Animals that live in groups very commonly do social play. This helps them to develop their bonds and relationships with each other and perhaps more importantly in some species like **wolves**, it helps them to establish the hierarchies within their packs. In wolf packs, play actually reduces the amount of violence because these social hierarchies can be established quickly and at a younger age. This is because the more dominant individuals can be selected through play and then they are less likely to be challenged as adults.

Play can also be used to help develop the neurons to improve their locomotive skills. That is to say, play helps animals learn how to move their bodies quicker and more efficiently. This is demonstrated by animals like baby horses that wobble and bounce around on their feet pretty quickly after they are born. Baby horses learn to run quickly and play around to develop those muscles and neural connections because as a prey animal in their wild grasslands, it benefits them to learn to run faster. Potential predators of wild horses such as the mountain lion take a longer time to learn how to walk than a baby horse who is up on their feet almost immediately. This is because the higher up on the food chain the animal is, the less worried they need to be of their young being attacked.

Animals use play to learn about their environment as well. They interact with objects in their environment to learn about them. This helps animals learn what other objects are and what relationship they have with them. Many predators use play to practice developing their hunting styles. This is why our pet dogs and cats love to attack, catch, chew, and destroy the toys that we provide them. In the wild, young predators can be found pouncing on rocks, sticks, or even prey that their parents have already killed. Even birds of prey like the American Kestrel have been seen attacking inanimate objects like pine cones and sticks.

Play may seem like a waste of energy in nature when animals have to focus on energy conservation, but play serves many roles that improve the evolutionary success of the species. Play helps to establish social bonds and hierarchies without killing, it helps with the neuro-muscular development and can increase the rate at which they learn to coordinate their movement, and it helps them to learn about other objects in their environment and develop the hunting skills that they will depend upon to survive. Humans are also a species that benefits from play for many of the same reasons.

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