

OVER A HUNDRED YEARS IN SEARCH OF THE MEANING OF ANIMAL PLAY

Summary

Animal play is a complex and diverse behaviour. This makes it difficult to study and is also difficult to explain the importance of this behaviour for organisms. One of the earliest hypotheses on the potential function of play attributed it to practice by the young of adult behaviour. Carried out from over hundred years behavioural studies point to such hypothetical roles of the play as physical development or species-specific behavioural practices. Studies of social games have brought new ideas about the functions of these behaviours: the determination of group hierarchy and the acquisition of social skills. Neurological studies have become significant in explaining the biological meaning of play by indicat-

ing activation of the opioid system and modification of those elements of the nervous system which are responsible for emotional reactions. Nowadays, researchers agree that finding a single function for all the patterns of playful behaviours is improbable. They can have different functions for various species and can play various roles within one species. However, investigations on the main function of play are still pursued. They help to learn more about this behavioural category and its relevance to life in many aspects: social, emotional, and developmental. Further investigations along this line may contribute to understanding of such issues as the theory of mind, development of moral values and creativity.