

JOY IN THE JUNGLE: PLAY BEHAVIOUR AND LAUGHTER IN THE WILD BONOBOS OF WAMBA

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Play behaviour in birds and mammals is widespread amongst infants and juveniles, yet almost universally ceases when individuals reach maturity. There are however a few species in which individuals continue to play into adulthood. This 'biological exception' seems to occur in the species that are characterized as having 'social brains', ie taxa demonstrating complex sociality and cognition. Existing play literature presents play as 'preparation for adulthood'. I argue that the existence of play in adults is intimately linked to the evolution of intense sociality and complex cognition. I set out to see whether adult play would be found in wild bonobos (*Pan paniscus*). Bonobos, together with chimpanzees, are our closest living relatives yet we know relatively little about them. I spent 7 months following E-1 group (28 individuals) in Wamba, DR Congo. The Japanese research camp of Wamba was established by Kano in the early 70's, and represents the longest-term bonobo research site. Play in adults was surprisingly common, with adult-infant or adult-juvenile play occurring in a daily basis. Unexpectedly, I found the adult males to be particularly playful, not only engaging in daily play with immature individuals, but also sometimes initiating playful interactions. Adult-adult play was also observed (albeit at lower frequencies), both with and without the presence of infants. Sexual activity happened often in the context of play, in all sex and age class combinations. Findings will be discussed in the context of the evolution of social brains, neoteny, bonobo tolerance and play as protean behaviour.

Key words: play behaviour, adult play, proteanism, social brains