

12.00pm

## Fair Play, Wild Justice, and Moral Intelligence in Animals

<http://marcbekoff.com>

Marc Bekoff and Jane Goodall (EETA):  
[www.ethologicaethics.org](http://www.ethologicaethics.org)

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/animal-emotions>

<http://news.change.org/authors/609>

Thanks to IPA England, Wales and Northern Ireland for sponsoring this presentation.

**Play is fun, but it's also serious business. When animals play they're constantly working to understand and follow agreed upon rules and to communicate their intentions to play fairly.**

They fine-tune their behavior on the run, carefully monitoring the behavior of their play partners and paying close attention to infractions of the agreed-upon rules. Four basic aspects of fair play in animals are: ask first, be honest, follow the rules, and admit you're wrong. When the rules of play are violated, and when fairness breaks down, so does play.

One of the clearest places to see how specific social rules apply is in animal play. Detailed research on social play in infant domestic dogs and their wild relatives, coyotes and gray wolves, shows how important the rules are. Frame-by-frame analyses of videos of individuals at play reveal that these youngsters carefully negotiate social play and use specific signals and rules so that play doesn't escalate into fighting. When dogs and other animals play, they use actions like biting, mounting, and body slamming, actions that are also used in other contexts, like fighting or mating. Because those actions can be easily misinterpreted, it's important for animals to clearly state what they want and what they expect.

In canids an action called a 'bow' is used to ask others to play and also to let them know 'I'm going to bite you hard but it's only in play' or 'I'm sorry I bit you so hard, let's continue playing'. Bows are used strategically, not randomly. So that invitation to play isn't confusing, bows are highly stereotyped and

show little variation. Play bows are honest signals, a sign of trust. Research shows that animals who violate that trust are often ostracized, suggesting that violation of the rules of play is maladaptive and can disrupt the efficient functioning of the group. Among dogs, coyotes, and wolves, individuals who don't play fairly find that their invitations to play are ignored or that they're simply avoided by other group members.

The social dynamics of play require that players agree to play and not to eat one another or fight or try to mate. When there's a violation of those expectations, others react to the lack of fairness. For example, young coyotes and wolves react negatively to unfair play by ending the encounter or avoiding those who ask them to play and then don't follow the rules. Cheaters have a harder time finding play partners. My long-term field research on coyotes shows that individuals who don't play fairly often leave their pack because they don't form strong social bonds. Such loners suffer higher mortality than those who remain with others.

Parallels between human and animal play, and the shared capacity to understand and behave according to rules of right and wrong conduct, are striking. We can learn a lot about wild justice and moral intelligence in animals by studying play behavior.

Excerpted from *Moral In Tooth and Claw*:  
<http://chronicle.com/article/Moral-in-ToothClaw/48800/>

Also see *The Ethical Dog*:  
[www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-ethical-dog](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-ethical-dog)

## Biography

### Marc Bekoff

Marc Bekoff is Professor Emeritus of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado, a Fellow of the Animal Behavior Society, and a former Guggenheim Fellow.

In 2009 Marc became a member of The Humane Society University ([www.humanesocietyuniversity.org/](http://www.humanesocietyuniversity.org/)) and was also presented with the Saint Francis of Assisi Award by the New Zealand SPCA.

In 2000 he was awarded the Exemplar Award from the Animal Behavior Society for major long-term contributions to the field of animal behavior.

Marc has published more than 200 scientific and popular essays and twenty-two books including *Minding Animals*, *The Ten trusts* (with Jane Goodall), *The Emotional Lives of Animals*, *Animals Matter*, *Animals at Play: Rules of the Game* (an award-winning children's book), *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* (with Jessica Pierce), and the *Encyclopedia of Human-Animal*



*Relationships*, and two editions of the *Encyclopedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare*.

In 2005 Marc was presented with The Bank One Faculty Community Service Award for the work he has done with children, senior citizens, and prisoners.