Guest commentary

The child's right to play

By Marc Bekoff

I recently had the pleasure of attending a wonderful meeting in Cardiff, Wales, called "Playing Into the Future — Surviving and Thriving." The major theme of this international gathering concerned the importance of play for children and how we can create a future where play is valued and where every country and neighborhood upholds every child's right for freedom and a safe enough environment for playing. Boundless inspiration came from about 450 delegates from 55 nations, including areas where children don't play because they're seriously ill, because their parents, families, or communities can't afford to allow them play because they have to work, or because there aren't any safe places to play. However, play is also severely curtailed in affluent areas throughout the world. Kids aren't allowed to be kids.

I was astounded that these sorts of meetings are even necessary so that kids can be kids. The situation is so dire there also is a United Nations Convention on the rights of the child. Every country in the world except the United States and Somalia has ratified the convention. Article 31 is specifically concerned with play: Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.

My learning curve was vertical as a relative outsider who was there to talk about what we can learn about human play from what we know about nonhuman animal (animal) play. After all, we are big-brained mammals, born helpless and requiring extensive adult care, who learn a variety of skills through different sorts of play. Much of what applies to the social development of nonhuman mammals applies to us.

The study of play behavior in animals tells us a lot about what human children need. Animals play because it's important for social development and socialization, physical exercise, cognitive development, and also for learning social skills concerning fairness and cooperation. The basic rules for fair play in animals also apply to humans, namely 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 in animals and humans.

Play may also be important as "training for the unexpected." My colleagues Marek Spinka, Ruth Newberry, and I have proposed that play functions to increase the versatility of movements and the ability to recover from sudden shocks such as the loss of balance and falling over, and to enhance the ability of animals to cope emotionally with unexpected stressful situations. Animals actively seek and create unexpected situations in play and actively put themselves into disadvantageous positions and situations. Thus, when playing, animals switch rapidly between well-controlled movements similar to those used in "serious" behavior and movements that result in temporary loss of control. It's adaptive to be able to deal with the unexpected in an ever-changing world.

As psychologist William Crain argues, we need to allow children to reclaim their childhood and let children be children. We need free-ranging kids. They must be allowed to get dirty and learn to take risks and negotiate social relationships that might be complicated, unpredictable, or unexpected. I love the slogan of Play Wales, "Better a broken bone than a broken spirit." We should embrace it with all our heart.

Indeed, let's make every day a child's play day. Let them play and let them have their childhood. Let's "rewild" the children of the world and allow them to be the animals they have the right to be.

Marc Bekoff of Boulder has published many books including "Animal Play" (with John Byers) and "Animals At Play: Rules Of the Game," an award-winning children's book.

What the NFL could teach Washington

By Alexandra Petri
The Washington Post

NFL players, like certain members of Congress, are

ing between the White House and Capitol Hill is played with