mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Do wild animals go to school?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hi, it's Danni. When I was seventeen, I started going to a new school. You might know what that's like. I was excited and nervous, especially because this school was a little unusual. It was scuba diving school! We did most of our learning underwater. I had to watch my teacher closely and copy what they did to practice new skills. I also learned hand signals that helped us communicate, like this one. It means turtle. And maybe you can guess this one. It means shark. Someone named Ximena has a question about school. Let's give Ximena a call now.

[Video Call]

- Hi, Danni.
- Hi, Ximena.
- I have a question for you. Do wild animals go to school?
- That's a great question.

Have you ever heard someone talk about a school of fish? Now, you probably know that's not the kind of school with desks in a classroom. A school of fish is just a group of fish who travel together. But check out these dogs. There aren't any desks here either, but these dogs are at school. See the special harnesses they're wearing? This is a school for service dogs that will

help people. Right now, they're practicing how to use the stairs at a busy shopping center. When you think about it, a school doesn't have to have desks or classrooms. There are all kinds of schools where people learn all kinds of skills, like fixing a car engine or playing a musical instrument or scuba diving. But something most schools have in common are students and teachers. At this school, the students are dogs, and the teachers are these people. But I wonder if we could find a school in the wild where the students and the teachers are animals. Let's check this out. These birds are crows. This one here with the tiny twig is an adult, and this one is younger. Watch what the adult does. See how it's poking around? It's using the twig to reach bugs that are hiding in the wood. How clever is that? Now that the twig has pulled out some bugs, both crows have a snack to eat. What do you think? Could one of these crows be a teacher and the other one be a student? What skill could they be learning?

VIDEO 2

I'm not sure how you answered, but scientists who study these crows think there's learning going on here. At first, young crows call out to be fed, but over time, they start to try out tools left behind by adults and learn to get food for themselves. Scientists think that these crows learn by watching the others in their group, and you have learned in a similar way. See how this baby is learning how to wave? Babies often imitate or copy the things that people do around them, like waving to say hi or goodbye. People might not even know that they're being teachers, but babies can learn a lot by copying. Some other animals learn this way too. See how these bear cubs follow behind their mom? And some cubs watch what their mom eats, then they copy her. That's how they learn which foods are safe. And listen to this. These sounds are made by some adult whales. Baby whales start out making all sorts of random sounds, kind of like how this baby babbles. But over time, baby whales start to imitate the adults around them and learn to

make the same calls as their group. But what if you need to learn something dangerous, like scorpion hunting? Notice that sharp spike on the scorpion's tail? It can deliver a sting that's seriously painful or even deadly. Despite the danger, scorpions are an important food for meerkats. Adult meerkats make scorpion hunting look easy, but it takes fast, precise movements. Trying to copy those moves would be tricky for a young pup. So adult meerkats help pups to get started. They'll catch a scorpion, and instead of killing it, they remove the stinger. Then they bring the scorpion to a pup. Now, the pup can practice hunting and won't get stung. Sometimes, a meal gets away. But after plenty of practice, a pup is ready for a bigger challenge: a scorpion with its painful stinger. Don't worry, though. The adult is still there if the pup needs help. Scientists think this process makes meerkats true teachers. Think about the teachers you know. Teachers help us build our skills step by step so we can learn new things. Adult meerkats do something similar. They change their usual hunting behavior to help pups build new skills. Step by step, the teacher helps the student become a better hunter. And if we've got teachers and students, then I think that officially makes this scorpion hunting school! So in summary, even though they don't go to a school building or sit at school desks, there are wild animals that learn a lot like you do. Some animals, like these bear cubs, learn by imitating or copying the behavior of others around them. And some animals, like this meerkat, also change their behavior to help students build new skills. They're teachers. Teachers and students are something nearly every school has in common. But I wonder if you've ever been a student and a teacher at school. Like, maybe you taught a new friend a new game or showed them how to do a new skill. There are so many ways we can all learn from each other. That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Ximena, for asking it.