



Do rats have a sense of humour?



Researcher Jaak Panksepp has spent years trying to get rats to laugh. His thesis is that there is an ancestral relationship between the laughter of human babies and the playful chirps of young rats. Rat laughter isn't much like human laughter. It's a series of ultrasonic chirps that are different to any other noises rats make.

How do you get a rat to laugh? According to Panksepp, you use "heterospecific hand play," which he acknowledges basically means that he tickles rats. Turns out rats are particularly ticklish in their nape area; this is also the area where young rats grab each other when playing. The rats that were the most ticklish, played the most and laughed the most. Tickling the young rats developed bonding. Like children, the rats would seek out the hands that tickled them.

Females were more receptive to tickling than males, but adults in general did not

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respond much unless they had been tickled when young. And, when given the choice, young rats preferred to spend time with adult rats that still “laughed” rather than those that did not. Negative stimuli during the tickling episodes, such as a whiff of cat odor, dramatically reduced the laugh response. Panksepp acknowledges that his findings do not imply that rats have a sense of humour, but he wonders if a rat might not utter a few happy chirps if it saw a cat run over by a car!

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