

Why Some Autistic Children Display Animal-Like Behaviour

Overview

Animal-like behaviours (e.g., crawling, growling, barking, pretending to be animals) are well-recognised within autism research. These behaviours are linked to sensory needs, communication differences, imaginative play, special interests, and anxiety regulation.

1. Sensory Regulation

Autistic children commonly experience sensory processing differences, and animal-like behaviour can help them regulate their nervous system. Evidence shows autistic children have distinctive sensory and play patterns shaped by sensory, cognitive, and emotional factors. Acting like animals can soothe or stimulate the senses, helping the child achieve regulation.

2. Social and Communication Differences

Some autistic children find social interaction overwhelming. Animal roleplay removes complex social rules. Experts note autistic children may pretend to be animals because it feels safer and helps manage social demands. Simplified animal play allows easier interaction without pressure to use speech.

3. Coping with Anxiety and Masking (Including Selective Mutism)

Children who mask at school or experience selective mutism often decompress at home using expressive or unusual behaviours. Selective mutism is an anxiety-driven condition, not a behavioural choice. After masking, autistic children may use playful or animal-like behaviours as stress release.

4. Autistic Special Interests

Animals are a common special interest for autistic children. They often develop deep, focused interests, and embodying animals allows immersive exploration of that interest.

5. Therapeutic Evidence: Animals Help Autistic Children Regulate

Animal-assisted therapies improve emotional regulation, reduce anxiety, and support communication. Interacting with animals increases oxytocin, reduces stress, and supports non-verbal emotional expression.