

Suckling behavior in captive plains zebra (*Equus burchellii*): Sex differences in foal behavior

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Abstract :

We predicted that the proportion of suckling attempts rejected and terminated by the mother would be greater for female foals than male foals, based on parent offspring conflict theory and on the assumption that throughout the study, all zebra mothers were in good condition because of captivity. We presumed that an increasing rate of suckling terminated or rejected by a mother would indicate a decreasing effort by the mother to invest in her offspring. We observed foals of captive plains zebras at the Dvur Králové Zoo, Czech Republic. We found that the probability of successful suckling tended (slope = 0.0016; $Z = 1.78$; $P = 0.074$) to increase with increasing age of the female foals, but decreased (slope = -0.0018 ; $Z = -2.51$; $P = 0.012$) with increasing age of the male foals. The proportion of suckling bouts terminated by the mother decreased (slope = -0.0077 ; $Z = -4.27$; $P < 0.0001$) with increasing age of the female foals, but not the male foals (slope = -0.0005 ; $Z = -0.34$; $P = 0.732$). Our results indicate that conflict between mothers and female foals was less than that between mothers and male foals. The observed sex differences in termination and rejection of suckling bouts could be explained by the different behavior of the male and female foals, or by the selective maternal investment. Finally, we revealed no significant effect of herdmates on suckling behavior.

Key Word :

mother-offspring interaction, parental investment theory, plains zebra, sex difference, zoo

Volume 88, Number 1, January 2010