

# Family, Friends and Dolphin Neighbors

Isn't togetherness wonderful? For dolphins it's a way to learn, to protect themselves, and to have fun!

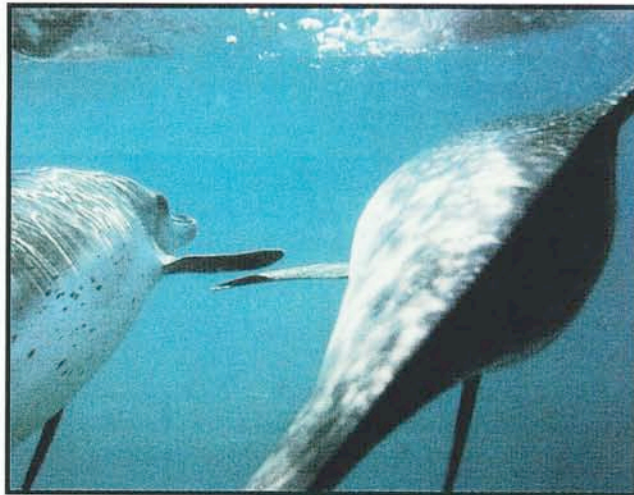
**P**unchy and Big Wave still hang out together, but now Stubby only hangs out with the guys. Lil has started baby-sitting and yesterday three of the boys chased away a bully."

Does this sound like a letter from home? Actually, it's a description of what goes on in a typical day among a group of Atlantic spotted dolphins off the Bahama Islands.

Led by researcher Denise Herzing, the Wild Dolphin Project team studies these dolphins and reports back on how they live, including how they get along with each other.

For dolphins, getting along is a long-term investment in survival. Like people, dolphins need each other. They get along by doing things together—feeding, playing, resting, touching, and resolving conflicts. To study these behaviors, researchers must first identify individual dolphins by the unique forms of their dorsal fins and flukes, and from the patterns of their spots. Dolphins don't all look alike! Then, following strict rules, the researchers enter the water, but they don't approach, touch or feed these wild dolphins. They wait for the dolphins to come to them.

Once a dolphin is identified, it is given a name,



*Like two people holding hands, rubbing pectoral fins is a way for dolphins to show friendship.*

like Little Gash, Luna and Nassau. The Wild Dolphin Project has now identified over 100 dolphins. Photos, videos and sound recordings are made by researchers and the fun of understanding what's really going on begins.

An Atlantic spotted dolphin, *Stennella frontalis*, for example, spends the first six months of its life by the side of its first teacher, or "Mom." Up to age three,

a baby dolphin meets and plays with other infants in what researchers call a nursery group, and begins to form lifelong associations and friendships. As the newborn meets other youngsters, it is introduced to the rules and games involved in being a social dolphin. These friendships are maintained in many ways. Some dolphins rub fins together, in the same way kids hold hands. Young dolphins learn about each other by watching, mimicking each other, chasing, and play-fighting. These skills will be useful when they become adults.

Without the friendship of other dolphins, individuals might not survive in the wild. To stay in touch, dolphins have a complicated communications system. Each dolphin has a unique whistle, called a "signature whistle," to identify itself or to make contact. It also uses sonar clicks to find



food and to navigate. Squawks, bleats and other sounds are used for closer contact with neighbors. By identifying an individual's signature whistle, Denise and other researchers can now tell who's who among the dolphins without even seeing them.

During the four or five years they nurse, young dolphins are protected. But they're curious and like to explore. When they venture too far into danger from tiger sharks, hammerheads, or bull sharks, a mother will chase and possibly "spank" them with sound waves. Frisky and independent three- to five-year-olds can be seen with close-call, shark bite scars.

Getting along in a dolphin society may also mean doing your job well, and one important job is baby-sitting. Young spotted dolphins often form groups of four or five individuals. A young adult (8- to 10-year-old) male or female baby-sits. Part of the job is to stay close to the babies and to calm down any youngster that gets too excited or makes

*Y*oung spotted dolphins are spotless.

*Here Jemer, an infant female (bottom) swims with her mom, Gemeni (middle).*

too much noise, which could attract a shark. Mothers often show up to discipline an unruly infant if the baby-sitter lets things get out of control!

Some dolphins just don't get along with each other. To communicate the message, "Leave me alone," there is a face-to-face show down, and one dolphin opens its mouth and squawks. Grouping together is another way spotted dolphins send this message, and can fend off teasing or aggressive advances of larger bottlenose dolphins.

Friends, fishing pals, baby-sitters, sparring partners, and squabblers—all are roles shared by these spotted dolphins in what the Wild Dolphin Project has learned is what it takes to get along if you're a spotted dolphin.

The Wild Dolphin Project is located at P.O. Box 3839, Palos Verdes, CA 90274. 

*By Denise Herzing and Patricia Warhol*