



HOW TO PLAY WITH YOUR CAT

By Pam Johnson

Brushing up on how to play with a cat may seem silly, but many of us underestimate the value of interactive play. Do you play with your cat or do you just toss a toy on the floor and expect it to amuse itself? Are you aware of how important playing is to physical and emotional health? Did you know that playtime can have a positive impact on the relationship between you and your cat?

Now that your cat is no longer an energy-charged kitten, how has your relationship changed? Are you still as close as you used to be or have you grown apart? Has your cat been demonstrating behavioral problems such as hyperactivity or unprovoked aggression? Perhaps it seems depressed.

Some cats problems stem from simple boredom. For them, life has lost it spark. This can result in behavioral problems as the cat seeks out other forms of stimulation. Maybe the reason your cat attacks your ankles as you get out of bed is because he's looking for something animate to play with. Take a look at playtime through your cat's eyes. Where are all those cute toys that you spent so much money on? Are they gathering dust in a toy basket in the corner? To your cat, they're nothing more than lifeless prey, offering no stimulation or challenge.

For a cat, playtime is the closest thing to an actual hunt. To be a successful hunter, a cat must be fast, confident and not afraid of its surroundings. So it makes sense that honing its playtime skills might be a way to boost its self-esteem.

The right atmosphere is crucial when you're reawakening a cat's hunting skills. You'll need to transform your living room into a proper hunting ground. View the carpet as a field and the furniture as substitute trees. If you have a big open space, add additional bushes by scattering a couple of boxes or paper bags in the room. Even placing a few sofa cushions on the carpet will do. Your cat needs places to hide while it inches closer to its prey. As it's peeking out from behind the "bush", it can calculate its next move. You don't just want to exercise the kitty's muscles, you want it to rely on its intelligence.

After you've set the stage, you'll need to provide an assortment of prey. It helps to be familiar with your cat's hunting preference. Some cats are adept at leaping into the air to capture birds. Others prefer staying closer to the ground to track mice, insects or snakes. Knowing whether your cat prefers air or ground hunting will be an advantage, but if it hasn't played in a long time, you'll have to learn as you go. Most cats enjoy both methods, but a few will develop a definite



preference. Your cat's age and physical condition will have to be taken into account. An elderly or out-of-shape cat will benefit more from ground hunting.

The best toys for interactive play look like fishing poles. They can have feathers, streamers or a toy dangling from a string attached to a pole. Even a peacock feather makes a great interactive toy. For timid cats, stay away from large or noisy toys. Don't choose a toy that could appear intimidating. A small, shy cat won't appreciate a toy twice its size.

You may have to try several before you find the ones your cat likes best. For air hunting, a variety of toys with feathers on the end of a line simulate the sound and appearance of wings. When you use this kind of interactive toy for air hunting, your job will be to think like a bird. Don't just fly continually. A bird has to land occasionally and walk around. It may take two steps, stop for a few seconds, then fly off. If you're constantly swirling the toy through the air, it can become frustrating for a kitty.

If your cat is a ground hunter, your challenge will be to think like a mouse. Imagine what kind of moves a mouse would make. It probably wouldn't just hang around in the center of the living room. It might run under a chair and then sneak a peek to see if the coast is clear. Then it might dart across the room and hide behind the leg of a table. Sometimes just a subtle twitching of the toy can catch your cat's eye. If you're using a snakelike toy, capture the slithering motion that a cat finds so mesmerizing. Don't always use frantic and fast movements. Give your cat time to plan its attack. If you're only dangling the toy in its face, then the kitty is just relying on reflexes to bat at it rather than using intelligence to hunt.

When playtime is over, be sure to put all interactive toys away. In addition to the danger of strings being chewed, these toys should be reserved for your play sessions. Between sessions you can leave furry mice and other safe toys down for solo play. Don't leave out too many because they'll soon lose their appeal. Your cat doesn't need a basket overflowing with toys. Rotating a few helps prevent boredom and your cat will think it's getting a new toy each time it reappears.

For your sessions to be most effective, play at least twice daily for about 10 to 15 minutes each time. A morning session before you go to work is a great way to say goodbye to your kitty. The play session when you get home is extremely important for an indoor cat because she probably napped much of the day. If you're consistent in scheduling playtime, your cat will soon look forward to your arrival. Even the most sedentary cat will perk up at the sound of your key in the lock. If needed, a third play session can be scheduled before you go to bed. Some cats who sleep during the day come alive just as you're ready to turn the lights out. One last session right before bed can do wonders for a cat who feels the need for a late night romp (you'll then be able to get an undisturbed night's sleep).



The location for playtime depends on the personality of your cat and whether there are other people or pets in the house. If your cat likes being in the center of things, then play with it wherever your family spends the most time. For a timid cat, pick a quiet room away from the household traffic. This way it can concentrate on enjoying the game. Initially, you'll be building its trust the first few times you play but your cat will eventually let itself go a little more each session. Choose a room with hiding places so it can feel secure. At first, it may hide under the bed, sticking its paw out to bat at the toy. Playtime will help it feel less timid. In time, you can gently encourage playtime in other areas of the house.

In multi-cat households, use individual play sessions initially if one cat dominates the toy in group play. After enough individual sessions, you can begin group play, but it's a good idea to have a toy in each hand (or enlist a family member's help) to distract the more aggressive cat.

Easing tension between companion cats can be helped by having each one play with its own interactive toy. This way, they're in the room together without having to fight over one toy. No one gets intimidated. Keep the cats a safe distance apart so no one gets a paw in the face. By using two toys, you reduce the chance of a fight. This method also helps the more timid or sedentary cat stay in the game. If one cat constantly backs away, more individual play time is needed to build confidence. Each cat needs to feel secure and safe so it can focus on enjoying the game. Soon, you may find the cat beginning to play cooperatively, even to the point of being willing to share a toy.

Catnip can be an enticement for an inhibited cat. Fill a sock with loose catnip or rub some on the interactive toy. When you're rotating toys, rubbing a little catnip on the ones you reintroduce will increase their appeal. Use catnip once or twice a week.

Don't leave catnip-filled toys around all the time because cats can become immune to the effects if exposed too often.

To ensure that playtime is completely enjoyable for your cat, allow it to have many good captures during the game. It may have even snatch the toy and begin to walk off to a hiding spot. After a moment you can let the toy come to life again and continue the game. If you always keep the toy out of reach, the game will become frustrating. Some people play with their cat by shining a flashlight on the floor so it can chase the moving light. Another popular game is to blow bubbles using the bottled soap made for children. While your kitty may enthusiastically chase these things, they can be frustrating because she's never able to capture her prey. If this has been your sole method of playing with your cat, try weaning her off of those play things and introduce the interactive toys. Your cat can enjoy a feeling of success instead of wondering why all of her best efforts continue to fail.



When you want to end the play session, begin by decreasing the intensity of the activity. The injured “prey” should begin to “die”. This will slow your kitty down and be a more natural end to the hunt. You don’t want to abruptly end the game, leaving the cat in an excited state.

View these sessions as special times between you and your cat. Instead of going off to hide after playtime, the timid cat may choose to stay closer to you. It’s worth juggling a busy schedule to fit these play sessions in to see the kitten again in what was a sedentary, nervous or depressed cat.

If you’re trying to help your cat to bond with a new housemate, this is the perfect time for interactive play. Start by initiating the game while the new person sits quietly in the room. After your cat starts playing, hand the toy over to the newcomer. (If your cat is afraid of this person, it may take several play sessions before you can get to the point of handing over the toy). Eventually, the housemate can initiate the game and your cat will begin to feel more comfortable.

Don’t be discouraged if during the first few sessions your cat only looks at you or half-heartedly paws at the toy. You both may be a little rusty at this and need to get to know each other again.

USING TREATS FOR BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

Treats can help during playtime, but try to limit their use as positive rewards for behavior modification. While there are circumstances when treats can be beneficial in accelerating a modification plan, they can also upset your cat’s nutritional balance. If your cat has any ongoing medical condition or is on a specific diet, check with your veterinarian before using any treats.

The most effective use of treats is for distraction during new cat introductions or in hostile multi-cat households. If the cats seem if they are becoming obsessed with staring each other down, place a small treat next to each of them. This is a great distraction to a cat that doesn’t respond to play as a means of diverting attention from the tense situation. Discovering a treat can distract the cats long enough to break the tension. Giving small treats when both cats are in the same room can help each one begin to associate positive things with the appearance of the other cat.

Treats can be helpful to desensitize a cat to an insecure area within your home. If your cat dislikes being near the front door, leave a treat there for it to discover. Combine this with slowly moving playtime to that area. Be casual about it; this will help your cat stay calm.



It's probably not a good idea to get into a treat-giving routine, or your cat will expect rewards. Use them sparingly and not at the same time each day.

If your cat is terrified whenever it sees its carrier, line it with a towel to create a cozy hideaway. Then place a treat at the entrance of the carrier. Do it a few times, then start leaving the treat deeper in the carrier. Don't trick your cat by putting the treat in the carrier before you slam the door on it. The treat should be placed there when it can move in and out freely.

Remember that treats are not meals. Your cat only needs a tiny bite as a positive reward. As behavior modification progresses, wean the cat off the treat by substituting praise.

BENEFITS OF INTERACTIVE PLAY

- Maintains muscle tone and improves circulation
- Exercises overweight cats
- Displaces tension between companion cats
- Motivates sedentary cats
- Eliminates boredom
- Eases cats through traumatic events
- Helps control aggression
- Discourages depression
- Stimulates a healthier appetite for finicky eaters
- Eases introduction of new people
- Strengthens the bond between you and your cat

KEEP A SAFE DISTANCE

If your cat is afraid of your child, having him or her use a fishing pole-type toy is a great way to build trust. The cat can enjoy the game without having to worry about being grabbed or bothered.

In multi-cat households where tension exists between companion cats, interactive toys can distract the aggressor. It gets to work out its aggression on a toy instead of a living creature.

If your cat has a tendency toward aggression play, interactive toys will keep your hands and arms safe. It also helps teach the cat that toys are for biting and scratching-hands are not.



From the San Francisco SPCA Cat Behavior Department



If you have rescued a cat or have adopted one that has recently been through a trauma, the interactive toy will allow it to feel secure. You can play with it while staying far enough away so it won't feel threatened.

Based on an article from CAT FANCY, December 1996

If you have further questions, please call The SF/SPCA Cat Behavior Helpline:
415-554-3075