

Cat: Playing with Your Cat



The most common reported form of aggression towards guardians in young indoor cats involves play aggression with unsolicited attacks, anywhere from light scratches to hard uninhibited skin-breaking bites. This behavior usually occurs in younger animals less than two years of age; however it can last many years into adulthood. There is no gender or breed predilection when it comes to play in cats, they all do it. Normal play behavior includes social, object, locomotor, and predatory play. They all start between 4-8 weeks of age and if not given the opportunity to play appropriately may lead to misunderstanding, behavior problems, and aggression as well as destruction of property. Under-stimulation such as being left alone all day or lack of appropriate play and exploratory behavior options may worsen the condition. Be aware that play time during early morning and evening hours corresponds with natural rhythm of hunting behavior in felines. It is therefore important to know exactly when and how to properly play with your feline companion.

There are a variety of cat toys on the market and include food and puzzle toys and toys that bounce, flutter, or move in a way that entices the cat to chase. The best toys for active play are string or wand toys that look like feathers or streamers or a toy dandling from a fishing pole. Even a peacock feather makes a great interactive toy due to its length. For timid cats its best to stay away from large or noisy toys and not to choose a toy that could appear intimidating. Some cats are more attracted to things in the air while others prefer staying closer to the ground. Knowing whether your cat prefers air or ground play hunting will be an advantage, and you may have to try several different toys and rotate them frequently before you find the ones your cat likes best. 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.

When you play with your cat try to imitate the movement of prey—this is much more interesting to your cat than continuous movements. Sometimes just a subtle movement and twitching of the toy can catch your cat's eye, and your cat will plan its attack. Avoid dangling the toy in your cats face; no prey does that.

For your sessions to be most effective, play at least twice daily for about 10 to 15 minutes each time. Include a morning play session before you go to work to prepare your cat for a day home alone; leave her with a variety of food and puzzle toys to engage in solitary play. 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. Yet another play session can be scheduled before you go to bed, this helps some cats sleep calmly through the night.

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 out for solo play. Don't leave out too many toys because they'll soon lose their appeal. Rotating a few helps prevent boredom, and your cat will think she's getting a new toy each time it reappears.

Tips

- When you want to end the play session, begin by decreasing the intensity of the activity. You don't want to abruptly end the game, leaving the cat in an excited state.

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- Don't be discouraged if during the first few sessions your cat only looks at you or half-heartedly paws at the toy.

How to Avoid Problems

- Never play with hands and feet
- Watch closely for playful body postures
- Manage problems with alternative active play options for the cat
- Enrich environment: Offer multiple climbing options such as perches and window hammocks, rotate toys often, provide easy access to looking out windows, hide food, use feed dispensing or food puzzle and interactive toys, use appropriate play toys such as wand, string, and feather toys, teach your cat tricks with clicker training
- Compatible feline or canine companion
- Safe access to outside
- Don't escalate play behavior; end play before it escalates and reward for calm and relaxed behavior
- Inappropriate play behavior should end in all play and may be interrupted with a mild stimulus that will startle the cat enough to stop the behavior, but should not make your cat fearful
- No physical punishment for aggression is ever appropriate
- Plenty of scheduled play interactions and scheduled play sessions

Benefits of Interactive Play

- Motivates sedentary cats and helps prevent obesity
- Strengthens the bond between you and your cat
- Can help cats become more comfortable in a new environment or with new people
- Decreases boredom
- Can redirect tension between companion cats
- Maintains muscle tone and improves circulation
- Can stimulate appetite for finicky eaters when using feed dispensers and puzzle toys