

Appendix 2

Play

Although the frequency of play activity decreases with age, it is an activity that is just as important for adult cats as it is for kittens. Insufficient opportunity for play can lead to behaviour problems such as aggression related to frustration and stress.

Cats and kittens engage in two types of play.

Social Play

This is play with another cat or kitten, or sometimes with another animal with which the cat has become well socialized. The following behaviours are a normal part of social play:

Stand-over and belly up: One cat or kitten lies on its back and ‘fights’ with another cat that stands over it. Claws remain retracted and bites are gentle and inhibited.

Pounce: The cat or kitten crouches and then pounces on or towards another cat or kitten. May be used to initiate play.

Chase: Running after or away from another cat or kitten.

Face-off: Sits near another cat or kitten and bats or swipes at it with retracted claws.

Social play or fighting?

Social play is the most common form of play between young kittens prior to weaning. As kittens grow up, object play becomes more common and there can be an increased risk of social play developing into real conflict. Also, because social play can appear very similar to fighting it can be very easy to misinterpret these behaviours. It is important to allow cats to play together; however, it is also important to be able to recognize the differences between social play and actual fighting.

If it is play:

- The cats are more likely to chase each other equally and swap roles.
- Claws remain retracted and bites are inhibited.
- There is no, or very little, vocalization.
- Following play the cats want to remain near to each other, groom each other or rest very close to each other.

If it is fighting:

- One cat is more likely to chase or ‘pick on’ the other.
- Claws are more likely to be extended and bites less inhibited.

- There is likely to be hissing, growling and/or ‘shrieking’.
- If one cat is the victim, it will generally try to avoid or run away from the other cat. (This can often make the problem worse as it can trigger the chaser to chase.)

If your cats are fighting, then it is important to discover the underlying cause and address the issue correctly with professional help.

Object Play

This is play directed towards items that are pounced on, batted, chased, and/or grabbed with teeth and/or claws. It is often regarded as ‘practice’ of predatory skills, but because these are behaviours that cats are instinctively programmed to perform, increased play does not make a better or more prolific hunter. However, a cat that has reduced opportunity to hunt is more likely to need increased opportunity to express these normal behaviours in the form of play.

Playing with a cat or kitten can be a fun and rewarding experience for both cat and human carer but it is important to play with the cat or kitten correctly:

- **Do not** encourage a cat or young kitten to play with fingers or toes. As the kitten gets bigger and stronger more force will be applied to teeth and claws during play, this can then become very painful for the person acting as ‘prey’.
- **Do not** attempt to punish a cat or kitten that might mistakenly use teeth or claws on you during play because this can lead to fear and more serious defensive aggressive behaviour. Because cats are stimulated to play by movement, the best action is to keep still, very slowly withdraw your hand or foot away from the cat and re-direct the cat’s play behaviour towards a more suitable toy.
- **Do not** use a toy with hard edges or bits that could come off and be swallowed.
- **Do** use a toy that moves or can be made to move easily.

Motorized toys

These are usually battery operated and move, or have an attachment that moves in a way that mimics prey such as mice or birds. Their main advantage is that apart from switching them on they require no effort from us. But there are disadvantages:

- They can be costly in comparison to other cat toys.
- The risk of injury to your cat is slight but, even so, it is not advisable to use them when the cat cannot be supervised.
- They are not so much fun when the batteries run down or if they break.
- Some cats and kittens can be frightened of them or of the noise they make.

Bat and chase toys

A ‘bat and chase’ toy is anything lightweight enough that it can be made to move easily by your cat batting at it with a paw. Anything offered to your cat to play with

must be safe for your cat or kitten (i.e. make sure that it does not have sharp edges or could be easily swallowed). Examples of potential bat and chase toys are:

- Table tennis balls.
- Old wine corks.
- Dried pasta shapes.
- Walnut shells.
- Balls of scrunched up paper.
- Cotton reels.

Lights, laser pens or shadows

Although these can initially seem like good fun for the cat to chase, they can cause frustration and associated behaviour issues because there is nothing for the cat to catch.

Wand toys

Sometimes called ‘fishing rod toys’, these usually comprise a stick, or ‘wand’ to which is attached a long string, sometimes elasticated, with a toy at the end. In some cases, the ‘string’ itself is the toy, which can be made to ‘wiggle’ and ‘slither’ along like a snake. The advantages of these toys are that even small movements of the ‘wand’ result in much larger movements of the toy, plus the toy that the cat uses his teeth and claws on is kept well away from your hands. (Fig. A2.1).

How to use a wand toy

- Draw the toy in long fast sweeps along the ground. This is often best to get the cat’s attention towards the toy and encourage play.
- Move the toy directly upwards, or in circles in the air, to encourage leaping and grabbing.
- Move the toy in small, fast erratic movements to mimic prey.

How to Tell if the Cat is Interested in Play

Play is not limited to chasing and trying to grab a toy. For some cats just watching a moving toy can be a sufficient form of play. You can tell if a cat is interested in the toy by looking at his face. As well as obviously watching the toy move, his ears will be directed forwards and you will also see a change to his whiskers and face. The whiskers play an important role in hunting and are pushed slightly forward when the cat is in a predatory/play mood. Use of the facial muscles to move the whiskers forward also gives the cat a ‘puffy cheek’ appearance (Fig. A2.2).



Fig. A2.1. Playing with a 'wand toy'.



Fig. A2.2. Forward facing whiskers and 'puffy cheeks', a sign that the cat is ready to play. Note also the dilated pupils, a sign of increased arousal.

Ending the Game

Be careful not to end the game too soon. Cats will often appear to stop playing and walk away from the toy and watch it from a short distance away. Removing the toy, or stopping the game at this point may trigger frustration as this is part of the normal predatory sequence and it does not mean that the cat is no longer interested. After watching for a short time, the cat will often go back to playing; however, if the cat leaves the room completely or curls up to go to sleep, then this can be a good time to stop.

Try to avoid a ‘reward crash’. This can happen if the cat has a very high motivation to play and a game ends suddenly while he is in a highly aroused ‘playful’ mood. If this happens the cat may redirect his predatory type play behaviour towards nearby people or other animals.

- Gradually reduce the movements of the toy, and eventually stop moving it altogether before removing it.
- If he does not lose interest, distract him onto another activity that has lower arousal potential, e.g. throw a few food treats onto the ground nearby that he has to sniff out.
- Remove the toy while he is looking away from it, e.g. while searching for or eating scattered food treats. If he sees the toy move this could trigger further play activity.

Catnip

Catnip can have highly variable effects on cats. It can often be used to enhance and encourage play. On some cats, especially young kittens, it has no effect at all, but on others it can significantly increase arousal to the point where it may even increase the likelihood of play developing into aggression. It is therefore a good idea to use catnip toys carefully until you are sure of your cat’s individual reaction to the herb. Also, be aware that the amount and freshness of the catnip in cat toys can vary considerably.

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