

How to Play With Your Cat

Maximize your bond while improving your cat's health and well-being

From Gary Loewenthal, for About.com

You enjoy playing with your cat or you wouldn't be reading this article. Interactive playing with cats is not only fun, but it provides valuable exercise for cats of all ages; just as important, it strengthens the feline-human bond, which is all-important to genuine cat lovers.

Kittens

Kittens will play with anything. Just keep dangerous items like string, plastic bags, small ingestibles, and just about everything else away from the insatiable Mr. Kitten if you're not supervising him. Many kitten owners will tell you that the only thing known to mankind that can keep up with a kitten is...another kitten. You'll enjoy playing with him with interactive toys, but be aware that he should learn early-on that your hands are not toys. Ignore this advice, and you may learn to regret it when he grows up and develops full-sized teeth and claws.

Why We Play

- ▶ Interactive playing (you playing with your cat) lets your cat hone his hunting skills: seeking the enemy target, making the stealthy approach, pouncing with conviction, relishing the victory.
- ▶ Exercise from playing helps your cat maintain a healthy weight.
- ▶ Playing is a positive way for your cat to release negative energy or aggression.
- ▶ Interactive playing strengthens the bond between your cat and you.
- ▶ Playing helps a shy cat gain confidence.
- ▶ A hearty play session is a good way to ease your cat's transition to a new home.
- ▶ It's fun!

How to Play

- ▶ Keep a rotating array of toys on hand. Some good cat toys you can buy: wand toys, balls with bells in them, catnip mice, and crinkly catnip things. Some great toys you already have at home: wads of paper, straws, and plastic rings from milk or juice containers. Put the toys away after playtime. If a toy is always out, it can become boring and unrealistic to kitty, like a mouse that never goes away.
- ▶ Make the toy act like a mouse or a bird to peak your cat's curiosity. Pretend that the toy is a frightened little critter. It runs away from the fierce kitty; it hides around the

corner, it ducks under the rug, it freezes. Don't overdo it; subtle moves are quite effective. Vary the speed and direction of the toy. Bonus: set out boxes and tunnels that both cat and "mouse" can strategically use for cover.

- ▶ Let Kitty set the pace. You can't force a cat into playing, but you can try different approaches to see what generates interest. If nothing else, your creative attempts will amuse him. You might try dimming the lights, since cats like to hunt when it's darker. Match the action intensity to your cat's interest. After a while, you'll get to know his playing style and his look that says "I'm ready to play!"
- ▶ Let him win. Don't make it too easy; let your cat enjoy the pursuit. But when he comes in for the Big Pounce, let him score a direct hit and savor the thrill of victory.
- ▶ Play to strengthen a relationship or ease stress. Your cat will enjoy regular play sessions with you - you make his toys come to life. In a multiple cat household, an invigorating play session with the humans can help the cats get along.

Afterwards, lots of praise and treats all around. Good times to quit the play session are:

- ▶ After you've gone for 10-15 minutes and your cat has just scored a decisive victory.
- ▶ You've tried for a few minutes to engage your cat in a play session, but he's just not into it right now.

In both scenarios, give your cat some nice praise just for showing up. In the first case, make the victory a little sweeter with a nice treat. Tell him what a good hunter he is.

Your Assignment

Two play sessions a day, 15 minutes a piece. Extra credit: additional play sessions.