

Feline: A guide to interactive string toy play

Why play?

The definition of play (from a human perspective) includes engaging in an activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose. While it is true that cats find play to be pleasurable because of the 'feel good' chemicals that are released by the brain when they play, it would be inaccurate to say that it does not have any serious purpose beyond that. Play for all species (including human animals) is essential, as it activates parts of the brain related to motivation and reward – and promotes tissue growth in areas of the brain that are involved with learning and memory.

For cats who are hard-wired to complete a behavioural sequence of locating, stalking, chasing, pouncing, killing, preparing, and consuming prey, the ability to have a suitable outlet to complete this sequence is critical for good emotional health throughout their life. In kittenhood, cats play with others (social play) to gain important social skills (see our handout "*Pairing of Kittens*" for more information) and with prey/objects to improve their motor skills and learn about their environment. As the cat grows, predatory behaviours are directed primarily towards prey. The need to predate does not diminish as the cat ages, but the frequency/duration/style of play may change over time. However, this is largely dependent on the individual.

Given that many cats are kept solely indoors and prevented from hunting live prey, owners have a huge responsibility to satisfy this instinctual need through interactive string toy play. Some owners who allow cats outside access may be upset by their cats hunting live prey – however, studies suggest that if owners play regularly with their cats and provide a suitable diet, they may be less likely to hunt. To facilitate play well with our cats, we need to first understand how they hunt.

Fact



- It may look like a cat is playing when they chase a toy or when we manipulate an object, but in a cat's brain, they are hunting, and if we are involved in the activity (interactive play), we are simply helping simulate a hunting experience.

Tip 1: Set the scene.

Cats are referred to as “stalk-and-ambush” hunters, and this style of hunting is common amongst all feline species to preserve energy. Under natural conditions, cats will observe prey in an area that provides them with some sense of invisibility (such as tall grass or behind an object); they may spend significant time stalking the prey and making their way closer before deciding on the perfect time to surprise their prey with an ambush attack. So, to “set the scene”, you need to create an environment that allows your cat to ambush. This is achieved by placing various items such as cardboard boxes, scratching posts, furniture, or other items in the middle of the room to make some clutter (see image below).



Tip 2: Select the right tools (toys) for the job.

Think about the type of prey that cats naturally hunt:



Toys that replicate prey in how they look, sound, feel, and move will be most appealing. These string toys/attachments are great options to start with and are available online or in pet retail stores:



DaBird



DaBee



Catcher Cat Teaser



Worm Teaser

Tip 3: It's got to move like prey.

All the cat's senses are fine-tuned for hunting prey (and avoiding predators). Cat's eyes are sensitive to small movements with an optimal focus around two to six meters away from their face. Anything closer than this is likely blurry. Cats have one of the broadest hearing ranges among mammals and are naturally attracted to sounds that prey make such as rustling, scratching, and squeaking. Tap into their superior hearing abilities at the start of each session by very slowly moving the toy against items such as boxes, scratching posts or furniture to make scratching/tapping noises or drag a toy underneath a towel, rug, or piece of tissue paper to make rustling noises. Try a few different methods to see what entices your cat to investigate.

Once their interest is peaked, begin to move the toy *very slowly away from them*. When you manipulate the string toy remember that you are moving it just like prey. Prey would never move towards a predator now, would it?

Next, consider increasing the intensity and varying the movement pattern. Suppose your prey intends to mimic a bird or bug. In that case, can move the toy onto a tall item (as if a bird was perching on a branch or a bug was landing on a flower) then, start to move it through the air like a bird in flight (try creating figure 8 patterns or moving between tall, cat-accessible perches such as cat trees). Then, allow your "bird" or "bug" to land on the ground a few feet away from your cat. This is a good time to switch up the technique and mimic injured prey on the ground or a bird foraging for food– to do this, try lifting the toy just enough so that it's barely touching the ground and then drop it to imitate the bobbing motion they might make. You can also intermittently fly the toy above the cat's head (just out of their reach) in the shape of a rainbow.

If your prey intends to mimic a rodent, continue moving it underneath something such as a towel or rug, intermittently poking out and then returning underneath. Utilise the clutter in the room to drag the "rodent" behind (see image below) and then reappear briefly before hiding behind another object - this can mimic how rodents run from one hiding spot to the next. In between periods of movement, experiment with keeping the toy completely still (in your cat's line of sight) and moving it side to side (as if the prey was shaking in fear).



The Ripple Rug Activity Mat by Snuggly Cat (see image below) is a great tool to utilise as you can drag the toy inside the holes which mimic prey hiding in burrows.



If your prey intends to mimic a snake or worm, try moving in an S shape along a horizontal plane away from your cat or up a vertical surface (like a snake slithering up a tree), varying the speed and movement. Use doorways and corners to drag your prey around – allowing your cat to ambush it!

Some cats that like to kick with their back legs may benefit from you dragging the string toy onto other items, such as kicker toys (see image below) at the end of a session, which can be a satisfying outlet for those cats that like to bite while simultaneously “bunny kicking” their prey.



Tip 4: Allow them to succeed.

Always give cats the satisfaction of catching their prey. Once your cat has landed the “killing bite” start to slow down the session. Pretend your prey is slowly dying before completely stopping. This allows the cat to physically and mentally “wind down”. If you want to continue with another session right away, as the cat is still very interested, try switching to a new toy and repeating the same structure as before: A slow start, with increasing intensity, then slowing it down and finally coming to a complete stop once the prey is “dead”, before putting the toy away. You can repeat as many cycles as you like, but remember that cats generally prefer short, frequent bouts of play anywhere between 2-15 minutes rather than one long session.

Tip 5: Time to complete the predatory sequence!

Providing the cat with a meal or treat after each session replicates a hunting experience, as cats would naturally consume their prey after the hunt. Offering some wet food smeared on a lickimat (see image below) is a great way to do this, as the designs mimic natural feeding behaviours and can assist with decompression.



Fun



- ↳ Don't forget to reward yourself with a treat to reinforce your own daily habit of playing with your cat!

Tip 6: Be patient.

There is no such thing as a healthy cat that does not play. Cats are biologically hardwired to predate, so if the cat is not engaging in interactive play, then it's likely to do with the environment, toy, or the way the toy is being moved that isn't triggering the predatory sequence. Don't be disheartened if the cat doesn't pounce right away. A huge part of the hunting sequence is observing and stalking – be patient and slow the movement down even more. If the cat is watching, they are interested – keep going.

Sometimes, you may need to employ other strategies if you've really given it your best shot.

- 1 Try another type of toy – some cats fear certain objects or when toys move in a particular way. In such cases, you can utilise a smaller item or a ribbon/string and try moving it even slower than before. Cats can also find the same toy boring – switch it up!
- 2 Play when the cat is most active - if they sometimes get the “zoomies”, this is a great time to attempt play!
- 3 Make sure there are no other distractions. For example, if there are loud noises inside or outside the home, then it's probably not a good time to play.
- 4 Dim or switch off any artificial lighting. Cats see very well in low light conditions because they are crepuscular, meaning that they have adapted to be more active hunters at dusk and dawn when favoured prey species such as rodents are most active.
- 5 Don't give up. Try again another night. If the cat consistently is not willing to engage in any form of interactive play, then it is worth speaking with a behaviour consultant for advice and investigating the cat's physical health with their vet.

Tip 7: What not to do.

There are a few golden rules when it comes to what *not* to do during play. If you have accidentally done any of the below at some point in your life – that's okay. We all have. You now have the knowledge to avoid doing them in future.

- 1 Lasers aren't toys. The high energy, frantic running and jumping is likely a result of the cat experiencing frustration as it can never truly catch it.
- 2 Don't bop the cat on the head with a toy or dangle it in front of their face. The reaction you may get (such as a swipe or bite) may be due to the cat feeling irritated/frightened/annoyed rather than playing – and there's a huge difference between each.
- 3 Hands/hair or other human body parts have no place in play. It's a safety risk to humans. We also tend not to like it when cats direct unsolicited play towards us, so it can really damage the relationships that we have with them. It may also require lots of professional help to manage the concern in future.
- 4 Avoid using one string toy to play with multiple cats at the same time. This may lead to (or exacerbate) conflict. Hunting is a solitary activity, so it's important that you play with cats individually by either separating them temporarily into different areas of the home and asking another household member to play with one whilst you play with the other OR providing one with a puzzle feeder or lickimat whilst you engage with the other, then swap.
- 5 Don't give play sessions half your effort or enthusiasm (turn off those TVs and phones). Satisfying play sessions are only possible with your full attention and are essential for your cat's health.

References: Mikel Maria Delgado. Play with Your Cat! Souvenir Press, 7 Mar. 2024.