

FELINE PLAY AND INVESTIGATIVE BEHAVIORS

How does play develop in kittens?

Young kittens play using chasing and pouncing behaviors that seem to have their origin in predation. Predatory play is an integral part of feline play behavior and early learning. This play in a kitten is often aggressive and intense. Kittens begin social play as early as 5 weeks and continue at a high level until about 12 - 14 weeks. Object play develops at 7-8 weeks when kittens develop eye-paw coordination needed to deal with small moving objects. Full development of locomotion occurs between 10-12 weeks and as a kitten becomes more co-ordinated play may become more intense. Kittens are attracted to moving objects and will chase and stalk them. Play is an important component of kitten development, and proper play and exercise should be encouraged.

What is the best way to play with my kitten?

Kittens use multiple objects as prey items when they play. This play behavior consists of stalking, pouncing, jumping, biting and clawing. Small objects that can easily be moved with paws and grasped in the mouth or between the feet are often preferred. Avoid objects that are so small that they could be ingested and cause intestinal blockage. Some kittens like to play with a linear object like string. This can cause severe intestinal dysfunction if eaten and should only be used under supervision.

Avoid playing with your hands as you interact with your kitten. The moving hand can become an appealing play object and attempts at correction could aggravate the situation. Although young kittens may not inflict damage, as it ages and continues to use the owner's body for play, serious injuries can result.

Fishing rod type toys and long wands with prey type toys (feather toys, catnip mice) on the end can be used to encourage play without contact with the owner's body. Young kittens will often fetch small fleece toys, or bat them across the floor.

Why is my cat always getting into mischief?

Another important part of the development of young animals is the need for exploration and investigation of new objects and new environments. These behaviors can lead to damage to the home as well as injury to the kitten. Preventing these problems is quite simple; you accept your cat's needs to play and investigate. Provide suitable opportunities and outlets for your cat to perform these behaviors.

How can I prevent damage when I am not available to supervise?

When the cat cannot be supervised leave it in a cat-proof area, with soft comfortable bedding and a litter box for elimination. Although a large dog kennel may be an acceptable form of confinement for short departures, most cats can be confined in one or a few rooms that have been effectively cat-proofed. This allows the cat some freedom while preventing damage and injuries. Child locks and secure containers can be used to keep your cat out of cupboards or garbage cans. Any of your possessions or household objects that might be clawed, pounced on, explored, or knocked flying, should be either kept out of the cat's reach or booby-trapped. Remember that with their excellent ability to jump and climb, damage prevention may also be needed far above floor level.

Booby-trapping can be used to teach your cat to "stay away" from specified areas by making the sites unpleasant. Before making an area unpleasant, the cat must have access to appropriate outlets to meet its innate needs. The cat should be provided with a post for scratching, some ledges or shelves for climbing and perching, and a few play toys that can be swatted, batted, or chased. Cat toys on springs and those that are hung from doors or play centers, ping pong balls, "whole walnuts", or catnip mice are often fun for cats to chase and attack. Cat play centers can be purchased or constructed to provide areas for perching and scratching in a relatively small compact area. Some cats like to explore new objects, so a few empty boxes or paper bags (never plastic) will keep some cats entertained until the owner has time to play. Sometimes

the best solution is to get a second cat for companionship and play. Be certain that the second cat is young, sociable and playful.

Although some people think of confinement, cat-proofing and booby-trapping as unnecessary or cruel, they are precautionary measures to keep the cat safe and prevent damage to the household when the owners are not available to supervise. Common owner complaints such as chewing on plants, scratching, climbing or playing in inappropriate locations, or elimination outside of the litter area, are just a few of the potential problems that can best be prevented with a little planning and forethought. Then, when a family member is home and available to supervise, your cat should be given more freedom to explore and become accustomed to those areas of the home where problems might otherwise occur.

How can I successfully booby trap areas where problems persist?

Booby-trapping areas may be a simple matter of making the area less appealing by placing a less appealing surface in the area (such as a sheet of plastic or tin foil) or an uncomfortable surface on the area (double-sided sticky tape, plastic carpet runner with nubs up). Home made booby traps can be constructed in a Rube-Goldberg set-up, by placing a stack of cups or empty soda cans that tumble down, balloons set to pop, or a water container poised to spill on the cat when disturbed. Commercial products such as motion detectors, mats that emit an alarm or mild electronic stimulation on contact, or mousetrap trainers are also available.

What problems are associated with play?

There are a number of behavior problems that arise out of over-exuberant and inappropriate play. Some examples are cats that rambunctiously tear around the household, those that swat at or pounce on the owners (sometimes escalating into bites and injuries), and those that grasp, nip, bite or swat at the owners throughout the night.

How can over-exuberant play and play attacks toward people be prevented?

Before any attempts at stopping or interrupting the behavior are attempted, provide sufficient opportunities and outlets for play. Choose play toys and activities that are appealing to the individual cat. Since play that is initiated by the cat could potentially escalate into overly aggressive play, the owner should select play toys and initiate all play sessions. Sessions initiated by the cat should be ignored or interrupted using a distraction device, such as the ones listed below.

How can over-exuberant play and play attacks toward people be interrupted?

Although interruption devices may be effective, physical punishment should be avoided. First, pain can cause aggression. If you hit your cat you may increase the aggressive behavior. Second, painful punishment causes fear and owner avoidance. Third, owners that attempt to correct the playful aggression with physical contact may actually serve to reward the behavior.

For punishment to be effective it must be timed to occur while the behavior is taking place. Punishment should be species appropriate. Noise deterrents are often effective in cats. For very young kittens, a "hissing" noise may deter excessive play behavior. The noise can be made by you, but if not immediately successful a can of compressed air (used for cleaning camera lenses) may be more effective and less likely to cause fear or retaliation. Some cats need an even harsher noise. Commercially available "rape" alarms or air horns make extremely loud noises that will startle the cat and interrupt the behavior. What is most important in using these techniques is the timing. You must have the noisemaker with you so that you can immediately administer the correction.