



Happy Hunters: Purrfecting Feline Play

Play is perhaps the *most* crucial part of a happy, enriched feline. Play expends both mental and physical energy, and can make the difference between a well-adjusted feline and a kitty who goes looking for trouble. So often we hear, “But my cat doesn’t play!” While it’s true that some cats are more play motivated than others, ALL cats are hardwired to play. The reason can be found at the root of play behavior—hunting! Cats who do not live with humans hunt their meals every day. This drive doesn’t disappear in our house cats, but can *seem* to when cats aren’t presented with their preferred play opportunities. Want to play like a pro? Check out our tips below!

Get regular! Try scheduling playtime every day! Time yourself if you need to, or plan on playtime during commercial breaks while watching TV. Make a *routine* so that the cat begins to expect exercise to happen at specific times of day.

Get active! The type of play matters! While cats love to bat around toys on their own, they get much more out of toys that put YOU in the driver’s seat such as wand or fishing pole style toys.

Make the toy act like prey. No bird or mouse just hangs out in front of a cat’s face—they race along over couches, under tables, on top of bookshelves, etc. Often the most fun is when they’re *about to get away!*

Include levels. Over and under can create exciting, novel ways to chase toys in familiar spaces. Tunnels, boxes, furniture, and shelves are wonderful options. Being able to sit on, jump on and climb on multiple levels is not only enriching, but will help tire them out!

Add noise to the toy. If the toy is totally silent, add some paper to make it rustle! Add a (gentle) bell to make it jingle! These are especially fun options if you are dragging toys underneath blankets or objects.

Ramp up, then cool down. Cat’s bodies work on a specific routine where food and energy are concerned. This is a documented routine in both wild and domestic cats; **Hunt > Catch > Kill > Eat > Groom > Sleep**. After the exertion and excitement of hunting comes the satiation of eating, then grooming, then relaxing to digest. Give them some butt wiggling opportunities first (the hunting/stalking phase), then the exciting catch and kill, then take a few minutes for the toy to “die,” rather than leaving them in that heightened excited state. Try feeding them after to encourage relaxation.

Explore your cat’s play style! Cats can have personal preferences when it comes to hunting.

Which “cat”egories does YOUR cat fall into?

The Hide and Seekers

There is a large percentage of the cat population that aren’t interested in toys that fly around in the air, but will immediately react to a toy *quietly disappearing* around a corner, under a chair, into a blanket or behind a bookshelf. These kitties are our rodent hunters! *Small, sneaky, rustling play* is what gets their butt wiggling. They are all about the pounce. Make sure they have hiding spots from which to “stalk” their prey!

Anti-Aircraft

What’s that in the air?? Many cats are acrobatic players who prefer *leaping up to catch a flying object*. These are our bird hunters! Try toys that can easily fly around and “land” on various surfaces, or do “fly bys” over your kitties hiding spot, especially if they make wing-like noises! These cats are outgoing and high energy, and love using different levels in play. Incorporate some furniture into your session, King Kong style!

Size Wise

Whether in the air or under the desk, what makes a difference to these kitties is the *size of the toy*. These cats can be intimidated by larger or noisier toys like feather wands with jingle bells in them, but come alive for smaller options like newspaper strips, string, or cat dancers. These are our bug hunters! Fishing pole toys with ends that detach give you lots of options. These kitties love DIY! A piece of crumpled newspaper on a string is a shelter favorite.

Pro tip: Leave out the lasers

While many cats will go absolutely bonkers for laser pointer, they are missing a fundamental component of hunting—the kill. For play to be fulfilling, the cat needs to (at least occasionally) be able to catch the toy. While it can tire the cat out, laser play can lead to *frustration*. That frustration can build into obsession, and in some cases OCD behavior. Because of this, we do not advise using lasers for play.

For more information, or to request behavior help, contact our behavior helpline at www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp