

# **FELINE PLAY AND INVESTIGATIVE BEHAVIOURS**

## **How does play develop in kittens?**

Young kittens play using chasing and pouncing behaviours that seem to have their origin in predation. Predatory play is an integral part of feline play behaviour 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 the eye-paw co-ordination 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 behaviour 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. However it is important to avoid objects that are so small that they could be swallowed and cause an intestinal blockage. Some kittens like to play with objects like string or wool but this can cause severe intestinal problems 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 they get older and continue to use human flesh 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 behaviours can lead to damage to the home as well as injury to the kitten. Preventing these problems is quite simple; you need to accept your cat's needs to play and investigate and provide suitable opportunities and outlets for it to perform these behaviours safely.

## **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 water, soft comfortable bedding and a litter tray for elimination. Although a large indoor pen may be an acceptable form of confinement for short departures, most cats can be confined in one or two 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 dustbins. Any of your possessions or household objects that might be clawed, pounced on, explored, or knocked flying, should be kept out of the cat's reach. Remember that with their excellent ability to jump and climb, damage prevention measures may be needed far above floor level.

Baiting areas with unpleasant stimuli in the form of noise or taste can be used to teach your cat to "stay away" from specified areas by making the sites themselves unpleasant. However, such techniques should only be used when the owner is present in the next room and can immediately come to the cat and offer an alternative to the exploration that has just been discouraged. Before making an area unpleasant, the cat must also have access to appropriate outlets to meet its species-specific needs. Therefore 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 centres, ping pong balls and catnip mice are often fun for cats to chase and attack. Cat play centres 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, but be certain that the second cat is young, sociable and playful.

Although some people think of confinement and cat-proofing 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 eliminating outside the litter tray, 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.

### **What problems are associated with play?**

There are a number of behaviour 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 related attacks toward people be prevented?**

Before any attempts at stopping or interrupting the behaviour are attempted, it is vital to 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. Firstly, pain can cause aggression. If you hit your cat you may increase the aggressive behaviour. Secondly, painful punishment causes fear and owner avoidance. Thirdly, owners that attempt to correct the playful aggression with physical contact may actually serve to reward the behaviour.

For interruption devices to be effective they must be timed to occur while the behaviour is taking place. The devices used need to be species appropriate. Mild noise deterrents are often effective in cats as are taste and scent deterrents. For very young kittens, a "hissing" noise may deter excessive play behaviour but in adults you may need to use a harsher noise. However, loud startling noises should be avoided. What is most important in using these techniques is the timing.