

Play Therapy for Your Cat

Does your cat need play therapy? While we can take the cat out of the jungle, we can't take the jungle out of the cat. There is a little lion in every house cat; he's a predator who needs to exercise his hunting skills. Owners are often quite frightened by playful aggression -- Cats will silently ambush feet and ankles when their unsuspecting people come around a corner or down the stairs. In some cases the cat owners have inadvertently trained their cats to play aggressively, but now the kitten is a full-grown cat.

Stress is the most common cause of inappropriate behavior. These stressors may include:

- **Territory.** A cat's territory is very important to him. Imagine the stress of living in a multiple cat household or with small children.
- **Routine.** Cats don't like surprises. Loud noises, new babies, visitors to the home, remodeling, etc. can all be very disturbing to a cat.
- **Boredom.** Our domestic cats are not far removed from their ancestors in the wild. They are natural hunters, but with no prey to stalk...that adds up to a kitty who is bored, edgy and looking for trouble!

Of course, the easiest solution is to get another cat of the same age/energy level for kitty to play with. If getting another pet is not possible, then it's your job to provide sessions of controlled play/aerobic exercise, i.e. play therapy.

Schedule 2 or 3 interactive play sessions a day. Try to determine when your cat is at his most rambunctious. Cats love routine, so try to have a schedule. Depending on how active your cat is the average session will last approximately 15 minutes. Use a toy that mimics the behavior of prey. Toys like *DaBird* are being manufactured and sold specifically for this activity.

During the play session move the toy as prey... like a little mouse or a bird. It should hide behind objects and occasionally jump into the air. Do not dangle it in the cat's face.

Build up kitty's confidence by allowing plenty of captures. When kitty catches his prey, be sure to give him lots of praise.

Play until kitty is worn out. When he lays down and swats with one weak paw you will know he's done. At this point he gets treats. He has complete the natural cycle of hunt, catch, kill & eat.

A little bit of baby food makes a great treat, too!

After the session is over, put away the toy. It should only be used for play therapy sessions. Regular sessions will make your cat happier, more confident, and less likely to manifest stress in unwanted ways. Obviously there will be times when your cat wants to play, but you are unavailable. It is important to have a variety of safe toys available to keep kitty occupied. Be sure that the toys do not have parts that can be torn off and swallowed, or long strings that could wrap around the cat's neck. Cats get bored, so be sure to rotate the toys every few days.

