

## Animal Friends Presents

### The Ins and Outs (and Overs and Unders!) of Cat Play: Why Cats Need Play Therapy

Cats need to play!

As newborns, kittens play with littermates to test their skills and learn social behavior. When they're around three months old, cats begin to play with objects. Kittens will play with just about anything they can kick, carry or wrestle, which helps them improve their motor skills and understand their environment. As cats "in the wild" approach adulthood, play becomes a matter of survival, as maturing kittens learn to find and capture their food.

Even the tame feline in a home with a nice full dish of food still benefits from playing. Kittens learn their limits, such as the fact that it's not acceptable to bite people, but it's just fine to bite a stuffed mouse or toy. Kitten energy can be redirected and exhausted by chasing an enticing feather at the end of a string on a stick. This is important for their adopters, as the expended energy translates to curtains saved from a climb or a full night's rest for you!

As kittens mature, they still benefit from playing, even though their need for wild and frequent play declines. Play helps them maintain their mental and physical agility, and increases fitness and general good health. Interactive play between cats and their guardians enhances that special bond that is the joy of sharing a home with cats. A favorite toy or activity can be used to get cats to use the scratching post or as a reward for staying off the dining room table. Cats who have plumped up a tad can hunt for individual pieces of kibble during dinner to burn extra calories!

And as if that weren't enough, play therapy, which is structured interactive play done consistently over time, has been proven to reduce or eliminate several cat behavior problems. Properly done, play therapy helps timid cats become braver, aggressive cats less so, and eases transitions like moving or adding new family members. Play therapy is even used to help cats become more accepting of other pets in the home.

Choosing the best toy depends on the cat. Once prey and activity preferences are identified, toys can be chosen accordingly. The three major toy categories are comfort toys, thinking toys and "prey" (or hunting) toys. Comfort toys like soft stuffed animals are most important for kittens, but adult cats can enjoy them as well. Thinking toys are toys like kitty puzzles. Cats are kept mentally and physically occupied by figuring out how to remove a ball from an empty tissue box or a play mouse from a paper towel roll – or even better, how to get treats from small containers with holes that dispense them as they roll. Thinking toys can entertain and challenge cats while they're home alone.

The toys cats seem to enjoy the most simulate prey and allow them to follow their instincts to hide and hunt and watch and pounce. Solo toys are best if they move when batted and can be chased and should be sized for wrestling and killing and catching and carrying! Interactive toys such as snake-like fabric and laser pointer dots are the most fun when combined with boxes, tunnels and perches for hiding, climbing and ambushing. The hunt, chase and catch through their "jungle" leave cats feeling successful, confident and tired – and their guardians grinning at the prowess and patience of their beloved feline companions.

Always check the toys for safety. There should be no small, loose parts or toxic materials. Stringy toys or anything that could strangle, choke or trap cats should only be used under close supervision. Cats enjoy toys that are new to them, so rotating toys and keeping them out of sight when they are not in use maintains their excitement. Toys come in a range of prices or can be homemade. Bottomless paper bags become tunnels and the area behind the bedspread fringe becomes a wonderful hiding place. The 'what' doesn't matter as much as the 'how often!' Cats need and love to play!

Great cat toys are available for great prices at Animal Friends' on-site supply shop and boutique. Learn more by visiting [www.ThinkingOutsideTheCage.org](http://www.ThinkingOutsideTheCage.org)!