



Interactive Play with Cats

Seems silly, right? A protocol on how to play with your cat? Playing with your cat may **seem** pretty simple, but there actually is an “incorrect” way to play that can cause frustration and lead to additional behavior issues rather than **alleviating** stress, which is our primary goal.

The following protocol will help give you some tips and tricks on the best toys to use, what to avoid, and set some rules for the game that will benefit both you and your cat so you’ll both get the most out of each session. Additionally, if your cat likes to play, then it could be a great form of enrichment, and often even solve many behavior problems.



Notes:

- Be sure to use appropriate toys, such as toys on lures or wands—anything that keeps the toy away from your hand so they’re not in the line of fire!
- **Never encourage your cat to play with or use your hands or feet as a toy**—this can lead to aggressive behavior towards hands/feet.
- Set a timer for ten minutes to ensure that the cat is getting a good amount of play time. Have some treats (or their meal) ready to give at the end of the session.
- Stop the first time your cat moves away or shows any signs of anxiety or arousal.
- **Never use laser pointers as toys.** Many cats will chase the laser pointers, but without there being a tangible object for the cat to catch, it can actually create frustration and over-arousal. Imagine trying to hold on to smoke without understanding that just because you can see it doesn’t mean there’s something to touch.

Teaching the Behavior:

1. Find a lure or wand toy that your cat likes. There are different types of interactive/wand toys that mimic different types of prey, and you should **try each type** to see what your cat engages with best!
 - a. **Bird**-type wand toys have feathers, strings, etc and are meant to be dangled in the air
 - b. **Snake**-type toys are long and thin and are meant to be drug along the ground
 - c. **Small prey** (ex. mouse)-type toys are small toys on the end of strings, also meant to be drug along the ground
2. Set a timer for 10 minutes. This gives the cat a good amount of time to engage in the game and get a good session without building stamina which could have an adverse effect in the long run.
3. Move the toy along the ground, flick it up in the air, and move it **erratically (start and stop multiple times)**. When you stop and hold the toy still, this is the time the cat gets to think about their next move (they often do the hunting crouch and maybe wiggle their rears!), so be sure you hold it still every now and then for several seconds! **Don’t move it in a predictable pattern**—that’s not how prey moves! Most cats have a preference for the type of movement (on the ground in front of them, around them, in the air, etc).
4. Do your best to keep the toy moving **AWAY** from the cat. Think about how a prey animal such as a

bird or a mouse would act if there was a cat around. They would never move directly **towards** the cat or climb on top of the cat, or boop them on the nose, etc. We want to try and make the game as realistic as possible so the cat will engage.

5. Wait for your cat to come out and chase after the toy. Be patient; many cats will take a few moments to minutes to stay back and watch the toy first. This is okay; watching and observing is part of the game! This is how cats hunt, and it is enrichment in itself.
6. When the cat does come to catch the toy, keep it moving, and try to find a good balance between allowing them to catch it and continuing to move it away from them. It's okay if the toy "gets away" as not every hunt is successful, but we want to still allow the cat to have success to keep them engaged.
7. Once the 10 minute timer is up, end the session by allowing the cat to catch the toy, and then drop treats or their meal next to the toy. Once the cat starts eating, remove the toy and end the session. This completes the hunt sequence, offers a conclusive end to the session and helps prevent the cat from being frustrated.

Interactive CAT Play by Dr. Mikel Delgado

BORING



Toys that are left lying on the floor are "dead". They are boring. Fun toys are like prey! They are usually small and quiet, and they move!

Playing is an **interactive** experience: a simulated hunting experience that gives cats physical exercise and stimulates their brains. We tailor our play to our individual cat's needs. Are they a generalist or a specialist?

Playing is also a way to bond with our cat. Not all cats like to be cuddled.

Make play a daily habit or activity, eg. before their dinner or bedtime, and whenever they have the zoomies! Just as dogs need to go out for walks and to sniff, cats need **enrichment** and shouldn't be sleeping all day.

Prey Types

for the SPECIALIST HUNTER*

feathers eg. Da Bird



mouse-like eg. Cat Catcher



bug-like eg. Cat Dancer



snake-like eg. Bamboozler



food puzzles

Introduce as a choice and never force. Many cats enjoy these. foodpuzzlesforcats.com



laser toys

...can be frustrating because cats can't catch them. Best use for short periods as a warm-up, then switch to a real toy.

NOVELTY: Rotate the toys to keep things interesting!

*For safety reasons, interactive toys with string/wire should be stored securely after play.

Play Tips

- **ALTERNATE SPEED OF MOVEMENT.** Try slow movements. Barely moving.

- **MOVE AWAY** from your cat or along a L-R plane.



- **MOVE UNDER SOMETHING.**



- Sounds of **RUSTLING** or **CRUNCHINESS** are exciting!

- **LET THEM WAIT.** Don't make it too easy or it will be boring.

- **NOT TOO CLOSE.**

Cats can see the toy best when it is a few feet away.

- Give the **FULL HUNTING EXPERIENCE** - paws, mouth, and whiskers!



- Most importantly, **HAVE FUN** playing with your little hunter!



Have you played with your cat TODAY?



whatyourcatwants.com

illustrated by Lili Chin 2021

