



Dr. Kim's feline mews



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**PLAY PLAY
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Playing is a very important part of physical and mental development of all animals and whole books and serious study are devoted to the topic. So what is play? There is nothing cuter than watching kittens play, but why do they do it? It looks like a waste of energy! Is it only kittens that play and is there an age when play stops and all activity has a serious intent?

TYPES OF PLAY

There are several types of play. Play is always relevant to future activities essential to species survival so it comes down to food and water acquisition, escape and social interaction including sexual, affiliative (friendly) and agonistic (aggressive) behaviours. There are also basic instinctive behaviours especially related to early survival – thus straight after birth kittens and mum both know to get the babies clean and attached to a nipple for milk to arrive. There is no time to learn this behaviour because too many babies would starve, so it pretty much goes like clockwork from the outset.

Of course, foals and calves can also get up and run at this same stage – but then they have been inside mum for a lot longer as well!

What is Special about Playing?

It requires a certain amount of brain development, particularly in the co-ordination section of the brain (the Purkinje cells of the Cerebellum) for there to be any directed movement (as opposed to reflex movement such as the 'knee jerk'). Early play activities in kittens basically involves figuring out how to bat objects around and pounce on them – the skill being acquired is learning to hunt small rodents. This is called 'Object Play' and is essentially an individual activity. Cats eventually develop an individual hunting style, but the killing 'neck bite' is instinctive and anybody watching even a four week old kitten pouncing on a toy mouse will see that they are focused and already know where to grab it - just like their mum!

As the brain continues developing, more complex skills are developed.

At about 12 – 14 weeks old, inert objects become much less interesting as the kitten starts to learn about 'Social Play'. This is the time when kittens are learning to interact with others of their own species in both friendly and unfriendly encounters. It's even better when the hunting pounce skills are practiced on a moving object – the other play participant! A kitten is genetically programmed to pounce 30 times a day as this is the average number of pounces it requires to catch a full day of rodent meals!

So what are the rules?

Essentially, play gives the participants permission to make errors without penalty. The best illustration is the lion cub who chews the male lion's tail and gets away with a soft bat around the head instead of a lethal 'don't bother me' blow! Play is all about voluntarily inhibiting the strength of muscular activity so no one gets hurt. The rules are intricate and involve signals from both parties about the willingness to play at that time and the roughness of the play. It is a skill best acquired by playing with a peer with similar abilities but anyone can play! In fact, researchers have found that even when food resources are unreliable or restricted, as they are for farm cats for example, adults will still spend some of their time playing both with kittens and other adults. Maybe it is for the exercise, but maybe it is just for fun! Play is not energy 'expensive' – even kittens only use 9 percent of their daily calorie tally playing.

What does this mean for your 'tiger beside the hearth' – your own puurrfect pet cat? Actually, it is very significant for both of you. Kittens have to learn the rules of play and if you are the only moving object in the house, then 'Tag, you're it!' As the playmate you had better teach and learn the rules fast or get another kitten to play tag at the top of the pelmets at midnight! Learning play-rules is particularly important as we humans have been selecting for cats who remain kitten-like for a lot more of their life and since there is no need to hunt anything harder than the fridge to get the food, all that hunting instinct is transformed into play.

The Human - Kitten play rules are:

No Hand-Hunt. Do not wave your hand and wriggle your fingers (or even objects resembling them) in front of your kitten to entice them to play. Remember, what kittens learn to play with now they will hunt in the future and a cat bite can easily put you in hospital. Even kittens can bite down to bone and when they grow to be a stirred up adult who views a hand as a legitimate target, an angry or frightened chomp could be the outcome. And the chomp may not be on your hand! As Dr Karen Overall, a world authority on dog and cat behaviour says, why would you wave flesh in front of a carnivore? And no 'Clawful Bear Hug and Kick'. This 'game' of attaching ones feline self to the arm or leg of a human and biting, clawing and kicking is a social aggression activity and part of learning to fight an adversary. Common sense says the adversary should never be something in your household that bleeds. Substitute a long sock filled with foam.

Do play 'distraction'. Toys on wire or knotted ropes dragged across the floor are great games and your cat can happily be allowed to

kick and maul them as they are replaceable! Bouncy toys on wire, bungee cords or fishing lines are great. Not every cat wants to play with a big toy the size of a rat though so keep the toys mouse-sized, especially for young cats. The Cat Clinic stocks a broad range of 'cat tested' toys to make your selection easy!. Hunting simulation with treat balls with food inside are fun too. Boxes with holes and objects inside rate highly. Be inventive! Hide food in different places – even under a plastic cup is more interesting than food in a bowl.

And best of all – teach your cat tricks. Not just boring old 'sit stay' but 'jump up here or over this' and 'run along a narrow board'. Stimulate your cat and yourself. You'll be amazed!

Remember also that not all cats are lapcats. Sometimes, like a teenager, just having the cat in the room with you means they love you! In fact, the official distance is 0.5 metres – closer than that and your cat is truly loving you in true feline fashion!