

Kitty Capers

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One of the best things about having a cat is watching him or her play. The cat runs, leaps, skids across the floor, and then takes off in the opposite direction to start all over again. For many cat owners, such antics provide endless hours of entertainment.

However, there is plenty in a cat's play style that may become undesirable, irritating or even downright painful to a human housemate. What cat owner hasn't been woken up during the night by an overly active cat? Or perhaps had his/her feet attacked when walking down the hall? Or watched in horror as beloved Fluffy climbs to the top of those expensive new drapes?

What on Earth has gotten into my cat?

Cats need to play. The appropriate amount varies based on the age and personality type of the cat. The basic fact however is that all cats will need at least some play some of the time.

Problems most often arise when human definitions of "what is play" diverge from feline definitions. Very few humans find intense delight in stalking, catching and shredding that elusive box of tissues!

Cat play can sometimes be destructive and/or annoying. Beyond that, it can be very confusing to a cat owner who doesn't understand the behaviors involved. Most cats choose certain games because they appeal to certain innate feline characteristics. When living in a human home, a cat must improvise in finding ways to meet instinctual needs and must adapt his or her activities to suit the environment.

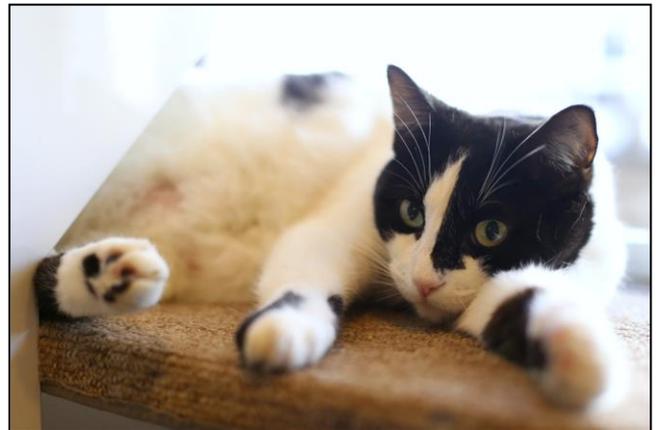
Our task as good cat companions is to teach our kitties what is and is not appropriate. It's our job to provide them with adequate play time, activities and toys to keep them both healthy and happy.

Components of Cat Play

Most cat games are of the stalk-and-pounce variety. Such games are instinctual and begin as early as kittens are able to wobble about and play with one another. These games serve as important practice for catching and killing food prey items in the wild. Never mind that our pampered pets receive daily helping of specially prepared meals –such games are a part of feline genetics and are here to stay.

The question is: how does your cat express her innate need to stalk, pounce and "kill"? Does she stalk your toes under a blanket? Pounce on your bunny slippers going down the hall? Shred the dishtowel hanging from your oven door?

If your cat displays the above stalking behaviors, she is telling you she needs lots of challenging activity. She's not trying to hurt you, make you crazy or ruin your household items. Your cat is merely doing what her inner wiring tells her to do, in the only way she knows how.



Tantalizing Toys

Many people love having cats as pets because they're fairly low-maintenance – well, compared to dogs, anyway! However, many of us forget that cats still require plenty of interactive play time with their people, plus lots of toys to keep them happily occupied.



While it's true that some cats will be perfectly content to chase that same little ball around the house day after day, the majority of cats need more variety and excitement in their lives. Can you imagine if you had to watch the same TV show repeatedly for the rest of your life or read the same single book over and over again?

Most of us would head off in search of something more amusing in no time at all. The same is true for cats. Cats need multiple toys to keep their lives enriched and entertaining. Without enough of the right toys, cats start seeking out their own fun, and this fun often does not mesh with human ideas of appropriate cat play.

Some of you may say “but I have *tons* of toys scattered all over my house and my cat never plays with any of them!” This is a case of having too many toys out all the time. While the toys you have for your cat are probably wonderful, she may just be bored with seeing them all the time – they have lost their initial interest and become part of the surrounding furniture to your cat.

One solution, without even buying anything new, is to put all the toys away except for a select few. Regularly rotate the toys out for your cat. She will be excited every time you bring out an old favorite – not seeing it for a few weeks will likely renew its attraction. Watch your cat essentially say “oh hey – I remember that one! I love that thing!” and go bonkers for the same toy that just weeks ago held no interest whatsoever. Another way to boost toy appeal is to rub them in catnip before rotating in a new selection. You can also purchase a few with pockets inside for filling with catnip. However, even with catnip and even with rotation, the sort of toys that cats bat around the floor will only hold their attraction for a short while.

The solution: interactive toys to the rescue! There are so many well-made and interesting cat toys on the market these days, and the selection is constantly growing. Choose toys that are well made for durability. The slightly higher price up front is worthwhile as you will not need to replace the toys as frequently. Please, always remember to put toys with string or cord parts away when not in use to prevent cats from any potential harm.

What is an interactive toy? An interactive toy is something you use to play with your cat rather than having your cat play alone. Examples include the Cat Dancer (a wire with cardboard bits on the end) or one of the toys that consist of a stick with a cord and a toy tied to the end. Most cats love these, and you do not have to run around to toss the toy for your cat. Essentially, it's a perfect way to help your cat get exercise and attention while you sit back to relax and watch TV. Or, even better, watch your cat do flips and jumps after her new favorite toy – it's far more entertaining than those same old reruns!

You may also buy the sort of toy that keeps your cat busy when you're not home or are unable to spend the time flipping a toy around on a stick. Try one of the toys that consist of a ball in a track with a cardboard scratcher in the middle. Many cats love these, and the dual nature of the toy makes it even more interesting

and versatile. If your cat likes to stalk furry toys or is very active, try one of the toys on an elastic cord, which can self-entertain for hours.

Ouch! Dealing With Feisty Felines

Many of us have experienced a cat that just doesn't seem to know how to play gently. Perhaps the cat plays nicely then suddenly grabs onto a human hand and "bunny kicks" and bites. Maybe the cat seems addicted to stalking and pouncing on human fingers and toes.

Please keep in mind that any stalking and pouncing game is something a cat does by nature; all cats need to play these sorts of games. The key for us as humans is to teach our cats how to channel this drive appropriately. Most cats that play these games do so because they have learned it's appropriate and okay through the responses they receive from their human companions.

We've all encouraged a kitten to play rough by "wrestling" with our hands. The problem is that then these same small kittens grow up and want to play the same fun games they learned as babies. They don't understand that they now have adult teeth and claws that hurt humans when playing the same games as before. All they know is that they had fun before, and their humans seemed to enjoy it too, rewarding them with attention. It's important to remember that any game you played with your cat as a kitten, she will want to keep playing as an adult. Your cat won't understand why you don't feel the same.

The basic lesson is: It's better to not play rough with your cat, ever. Don't play "wiggle the toes under the blanket" – you will end up with a cat that wants to attack your feet at night. She thinks it's a game; you think it's an irritating and painful way to wake up each night. Don't play "bat the fingers" – you will end up with a cat that will try to grab and wrestle with your hands if you try to pet her while she is feeling feisty.

If you never teach your cat that these games are appropriate, you won't have to retrain her later in life. You may still play the same entertaining wrestling and stalking games, but use an interactive toy instead of your fingers and toes.

If your cat is already playing rough, unwanted games, all is not lost – you can train a cat to play more gently! First, immediately stop rewarding the cat by responding. If your cat grabs your hand or pant leg, freeze and don't move until she lets go. We call this playing "dead mouse." Anyone who has ever seen a cat playing with a mouse has seen her flip it over her head and play with it until it finally goes limp, whereupon she generally loses interest immediately.

Since your cat plays stalking and biting games as part of her natural prey drive, you can apply the same ideas in modifying her behavior. If she "catches" you, and you stop moving, she will let go after a moment or so because the game is no longer fun. Don't struggle to get away – this will only intensify her desire to hang on. When she lets go, immediately praise her, give her attention (or perhaps a small treat) and begin playing with her with an appropriate toy instead of your hands or feet.

Do this consistently and she will realize that she has far more fun playing with other things and not attacking you. This





technique works, but it's important to be consistent and avoid rough finger-and-toe games with your cat.

Midnight Marauders

Many people wonder why their cat, normally so docile during the day, can suddenly turn into a hyperactive lunatic as soon as the lights go off.

The most basic answer is: cats are nocturnal. While cats have been tamed to live with humans, they still retain a large portion of their innate characteristics, such as roaming about at night. Since they no longer need to stalk their nightly meals, house cats find other ways to amuse themselves and pacify the instincts telling them to roam about in the dark.

Depending on the cat, this behavior is expressed in different ways. Some cats will pounce on human fingers hanging over the side of a bed. Others will run laps around the house like mad creatures. Some will very delicately knock items off shelves, one at a time, enjoying the racket each item makes when it hits the floor. Many simply wander the perimeter of the home, yowling periodically.

No matter what the chosen outlet is, nocturnal activity can be a cat owner's biggest frustration. No one likes to lose sleep, and it can be frustrating to feel as though you can't remedy the situation. Fortunately, there are some measures you can take to help curb an overactive kitty. The best solution is to make sure your cat gets lots of playtime during waking hours. This should be play with lots of physical activity.

The idea is to tire your cat out by keeping her up during the day, as she will then be more likely to sleep during the night. Think about it – most of us work during the day. Our cats stay home alone with nothing to do... so they sleep the day away. When nighttime comes, they're ready to play and are confused as to why you would rather sleep than do the same.

There are two ways to tire your cat out with play during waking hours. One is to have plenty of the sorts of toys described in the above sections. If your cat has toys she can stalk alone during the day, she probably will do so. Then, if you have some interactive toys to play with her when you come home, you can tire her out with a good play session shortly before you go to bed.

Mental activity is just as important as physical activity for making your cat sleepy. There are some ways you can keep your cat entertained at home even when you are not there to be a part of the action. Consider installing a bird feeder outside a window. Make sure your cat can see out this window – if possible, select a window your cat already likes to sit near. Your cat will likely spend hours watching the birds come to the feeder.

You may also want to consider getting a small fish tank (with a secure cover!). Many cats greatly enjoy watching fish. One word of warning with these tactics is to watch your cat for a bit – make sure she is not overly frustrated by seeing birds or fish while unable to "get" to them. Most cats are content simply to watch, yet some will become frustrated and confused. If your cat seems frustrated rather than entertained by her "kitty television," it's best to remove the distraction completely.



Another idea is to take your cat for walks on a leash and harness. While you must go slowly when introducing your cat to walking on a leash as well as getting used to going outside with you, many cats enjoy this option. In addition to providing them with some physical activity, the many sights and smells provide for lots of mental activity as well. Before taking your cat outdoors, make sure she is either up to date on all vaccinations or has had a recent blood titer done to confirm that your cat is sufficiently protected against illness and disease. You will also want to make sure your cat has a break-away collar with a current ID tag. Of course, always keep vigilant watch for dogs coming your way.

If none of this helps in tiring your cat, there are a few other options you can try. If your cat can stand to be separated from you, try shutting the bedroom door and leaving the cat with the rest of the house at night. You may also consider sleeping with earplugs; some of the foam varieties are comfortable and block out most kitty noise. Finally, if you have a single cat, sometimes the best solution is to consider getting a second cat. Not only will your cat have another kitty to play with at night, she will also have a playmate during the day when you're at work. This means that your cat will likely not be sleeping all day, waiting for you to return. Most cats are very social and with a proper, slow introduction, most greatly appreciate feline companionship.

Conclusion

Many people choose cats as pets because they are seen as low-maintenance, easy pets. For the most part, this belief is true. However, this also means that when a cat acts out, people often don't know what to do in response. Always remember that punishing a cat will never properly stop the behavior. Punishment will only confuse your cat and/or make your cat afraid of you. Instead, find a way to channel your cat's play interests and instincts into activities that keep her healthy, happy and regarded as a wonderful member of the family.

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.