



A Guide To Interactive String Toy Play



Why Play?

The definition of play from a human perspective is to engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation, rather than a serious or practical purpose. However, play for cats is serious business! It activates parts of the brain related to motivation and reward – and promotes tissue growth in areas of the brain that are involved with learning and memory. This is essential for all species, including human animals.

Cats are hard-wired to locate, stalk, chase, pounce, kill, prepare, and consume prey; giving them the opportunity to complete this sequence of behaviour is critical for good emotional health throughout their life. In kittenhood, cats play with others (social play) to gain important social skills (see *Handout Pairing of Kittens*), and with prey/objects to improve their motor skills and learn about their environment. As cats grow, predatory behaviours are directed towards prey. The frequency, duration and style of play may change over time, however this depends on the individual.

Given that many cats are kept indoors and prevented from hunting live prey, owners have a huge responsibility to satisfy a cats



instinctual need to hunt, which can be done through interactive string toy play. Those who allow cats outside may be upset by their cats hunting live prey – however, studies suggest that if owners play regularly with their cat and provide a suitable diet, they may be less likely to hunt. To facilitate play with our cats, we first need to understand how they hunt.

It may look like a cat is playing when they chase a toy or when we manipulate an object, but in a cat's brain they are hunting. Through interactive play, we can help simulate a hunting experience!

Tip 1: Set the scene

Cats are “stalk-and-ambush” hunters which allows them to preserve energy. In nature cats observe prey from a hiding spot, such as tall grass or behind an object; they may spend significant time stalking the prey and getting closer before deciding on the perfect time for an ambush attack.

So, to “set the scene” create an environment that allows your cat to ambush. Place items such as cardboard boxes, scratching posts, furniture, or other items in the middle of the room to make some clutter.



Tip 2: Select the right tools (toys) for the job

Think about the type of prey that cats naturally hunt...



Toys that replicate the way prey looks, sounds, feels, and moves are most appealing. These string toys/attachments are great options to start with, and are available online or in pet retail stores:



Da Bird



Da Bee



Catcher Cat Teaser



Worm Teaser

Tip 3: It's got to move like prey

Cat's senses are fine tuned for hunting prey and avoiding predators.



Cat's eyes are sensitive to small movements with optimal focus around two – six meters away from their face; anything closer is likely blurry.



Cats have one of the broadest hearing ranges amongst mammals and are naturally attracted to sounds that prey make such as rustling, scratching, and squeaking.

Tap into their superior hearing abilities at the start of each session by very slowly moving the toy against items like boxes, scratching posts or furniture, to make scratching and tapping noises, or drag a toy under a towel, rug, or piece of tissue paper to make rustling noises. Try a few different methods to see what entices your cat to investigate.

Once their interest is piqued, move the toy *very slowly away from them*, like prey. Prey would never move towards a predator now, would it? Next, increase the intensity and vary the pattern of movement.



Mimic a bird or bug: move toy onto a tall item (like a bird perching on a branch, or a bug landing on a flower), then move it through the air like a bird in flight (try creating figure 8 patterns or moving between tall, cat-accessible perches such as cat trees).

Then, allow your "bird" or "bug" to land on the ground, a few feet away from your cat. This is a good time to switch up the technique and mimic injured prey on the ground or a bird foraging for food – try lifting the toy just enough so that it's barely touching the ground, then bob it to imitate the motion they make. Intermittently fly the toy above the cat's head (just out of their reach) in the shape of a rainbow.



Mimic a rodent: move toy under a towel or rug, intermittently poking out then returning underneath. Drag the "rodent" behind items, reappear briefly, before hiding again behind another object - like rodents moving between hiding spots. Try keeping the toy completely still (in your cat's line of sight) and moving it side to side, as if the prey was shaking in fear.



Mimic a snake or worm: try moving in an 'S' shape along the ground away from your cat, or up a vertical surface (like a snake slithering up a tree), varying the speed and movement. Use doorways and corners to drag your prey around – allow your cat to ambush it!



Dragging toys through holes in the The Ripple Rug Activity Mat by Snuggly mimics prey hiding in burrows



Drag the toy onto other items like kicker toys at the end of a session, so they can bite and "bunny kick" their prey

Tip 4: Allow them to succeed

Always give cats the satisfaction of catching their prey. Once your cat has landed the “killing bite” really start to slow down the session. Pretend your prey is slowly dying before completely stopping. This allows the cat to physically and mentally “wind down”. If your cat is still interested and wants another play session right away, try a new toy and repeat as before: a slow start, with increasing intensity, then slowing down and stopping once the prey is “dead”, before putting the toy away. You can repeat as many cycles as you like, but remember cats generally prefer short, frequent play sessions between 2-15 minutes, rather than one long session.



Tip 5: Time to complete the predatory sequence!

Give your cat a meal or treat afterwards to replicate the hunting experience, as cats naturally consume their prey after the hunt. Offering some wet food smeared on a lickmat mimics natural feeding behaviours and can assist with decompression. Remember to reward yourself with a treat to reinforce your own daily habit of playing with your cat!



Tip 6: Be Patient

There's no such thing as a healthy cat who doesn't play. Cats are biologically hardwired to predate, so if the cat is not playing, it's likely to do with the environment, toy, or technique of movement that isn't triggering their predatory response. Don't be disheartened if the cat doesn't pounce right away. A huge part of the hunting sequence is observing and stalking – be patient and slow the movement down even more. If the cat is watching, they are interested – keep going!

- 1. Try another strategy** if you've really given it your best shot.
- 2. Try another type of toy** – some cats fear certain objects or when toys move in a particular way. Use a smaller item or a ribbon/string and try moving it even slower. Cats can also find the same toy boring – switch it up!
- 3. Play during times when the cat is most active** - if they sometimes get the “zoomies” this is a great time to attempt play!
- 4. Make sure there are no other distractions** e.g., if there are loud noises inside or outside the home then it's probably not a good time to play.
- 5. Dim or switch off artificial lighting.** Cats see very well in low light because they are crepuscular, meaning they have adapted to be more active hunters at dusk and dawn when favoured prey species such as rodents are most active.
- 6. Don't give up!** Try again another night. If the cat is consistently not willing to engage in any form of interactive play, then speak with a behaviour consultant for advice, and investigate the cat's physical health with their vet.

Tip 7: What *not* to do.

There are a few golden rules when it comes to what NOT to do during play. If you have accidentally done any of the below – that's okay. We all have. You now have the knowledge to avoid doing them in future.

- 1. Lasers aren't toys.** The high energy, frantic running and jumping is likely a result of the cat experiencing frustration as it can never truly catch it.
- 2. Don't bop the cat on the head with a toy or dangle it in front of their face.** The reaction you may get (such as a swipe or bite) may be the cat feeling irritated/frightened/annoyed rather than playing – there's a huge difference between each.
- 3. Hands/hair or other human body parts have no place in play.** It's a safety risk to humans. We tend to dislike when cats direct unsolicited play towards us, so it can damage our relationship with our cat. It may require lots of professional help to manage the concern in future.
- 4. Avoid using one string toy to play with multiple cats at the same time.** This may lead to (or exacerbate) conflict. Hunting is a solitary activity, so it's important you play with cats individually, by either separating them temporarily into different areas of the home and asking another household member to play with one whilst you play with the other OR provide one with a puzzle feeder or lickimat whilst you engage with the other, then swap.
- 5. Don't give play sessions half your effort or enthusiasm** (turn off those TV's and phones). Satisfying play sessions are only possible with your full attention and are essential for your cats health.



These tips appear in Play With Your Cat by Mikel Maria Delgado. For more helpful information, please purchase her book: [Mikel Maria Delgado. Play with Your Cat! Souvenir Press, 7 Mar. 2024.](#)