

Cat Play- What it is and Why it is SO Important

One of the common reasons why people claim they adopt cats is because they are a low maintenance pet that does not require much attention. While this may be somewhat accurate compared to dogs, cats still have essential needs beyond food, water, and toilet.

- **Why Play?**

Cats are not completely domesticated and they are still driven by their predatory instincts. Play is a crucial part of satisfying your cat's predatory needs. Dogs and cats both need physical exercise, and cats fulfill this need through play just as a dog does. If a cat does NOT get regular play sessions, they will find "naughty" ways to find release via ankle biting, stalking, climbing curtains, and foraging for table scraps.

- **How to Play**

Cats live by a certain cycle: Hunt, catch, kill, eat, groom, sleep. It is best to accommodate that schedule. First, engage your cat in play sporadically as if the feather wand were a bird, or the ground toy were a snake. Allow your cat to catch and "kill" the toys every now and then before starting the chase again. End play sessions after 20-30 minutes, or however long it takes for your cat to tire out. Once the play session is over, feed your cat a meal or small treat to fulfill that predatory cycle.

- **How NOT to Play**

Believe it or not, there IS a wrong way to play with your cat. The worst thing you can do when playing with your cat is wiggling your fingers or toes as if they were toys. While this seems harmless in kittens, anything a kitten learns will become habit in adulthood. An adult cat who thinks fingers are toys will bite and will cause puncture wounds. Be safe and keep play focused on appropriate cat toys! Appropriate cat toys are also safe ones. Do not engage your cat in play with dental floss, yarn, hair ties, or plastic bags. These all pose safety hazards and bad adult habits. Lastly, allow your cats to hunt their toys, rather than predictably swinging a wand back and forth like a pendulum. Sporadic movement encourages your cat to run, jump, stretch, and pounce in order to burn energy while predictable movements lead to boredom.

- **Play as Prevention**

The more you play with your cat, the less likely he/she will be to get into trouble. A tired cat is a well-behaved, fulfilled cat! Play has been used as prevention against a good number of behavioral issues such as aggression, cat-cat issues, and even litter box issues!

- **But My Couch Potato Cat Won't Play!**

Even if you have an old (or young!) couch potato cat, they CAN still play! It may not seem like it, but moving a feather wand around them still does your cat some good. Visually tracking a toy still has a world of benefits to your cat, even when they aren't moving their body. Their inner predator cat is engaged and, the more you practice this, the more likely you are to see a paw go for that toy.

If you have any issues with your cat's play style- or any other behavioral issue- contact the HAWS Behavior Department at (262)542-8851 ext. 204. HAWS offers 2 complimentary behavior consultations for the life of your HAWS adoptee. We are here to help!