BEHAVIOR SERIES

Cat Toys and How to Use Them

ALTHOUGH CATS generally have different play styles than their canine counterparts, toys are as much a necessity for cats as they are for dogs. Toys help fight boredom and give cats an outlet for their instinctive prey-chasing behaviors. And when you are the one moving the toy around while your cat fishes for it, chases after it, or jumps in pursuit of it, playtime becomes a bonding experience for you and your cat.

"Safe" Toys

Our mothers always told us "no playing ball in the house," but cats can usually participate in that forbidden exercise without knocking down a vase or a lamp (and being grounded for two weeks). Still, there are plenty of factors that may contribute to the safety of the toy they're batting around.

Many of those factors are completely dependent upon your cat's size, activity level, and preferences. Another factor to be considered is the environment in which your cat spends her time. Although we can't guarantee your cat's enthusiasm or her safety with any specific toy, we can offer the following guidelines.

Be Cautious

The things that are usually the most attractive to cats are often the very things that are the most dangerous. Cat-proof your home by removing string, ribbon, yarn, rubber bands, plastic milk jug rings, paper clips, pins, needles, dental floss, and anything else that could be ingested. All of these items are dangerous, no matter how cute your cat may appear when she's playing with them.

Avoid or alter any toys that aren't "cat proof" by removing ribbons, feathers, strings, eyes, or other small parts that could be chewed and ingested.

Soft toys should be machine washable. Look for stuffed toys that are labeled as safe for children under three years of age and that don't contain any dangerous fillings. Problem fillings include things like nutshells and polystyrene beads. Remember that rigid toys are not as attractive to cats.

Recommended Toys

Active Toys

- Round plastic shower curtain rings, which are fun either as a single ring to bat around, hide, or carry, or when linked together and hung in an enticing spot.
- Plastic balls, with or without bells inside.
- Ping-Pong balls and plastic practice golf balls with holes to help cats carry them. Try putting one in a dry bathtub, as the captive ball is much more fun than one that escapes under the sofa. You'll probably want to remove the balls from the bathtub before bedtime, or you may lose some sleep, as two o'clock in the morning seems to be a prime time for this game.

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- Paper bags with any handles removed. Paper bags are good for pouncing, hiding, and interactive play. Plastic bags are not a good idea, as many cats like to chew and ingest the plastic.
- Sisal-wrapped toys, which are very attractive to cats who tend to ignore soft toys.
- Empty cardboard tubes from toilet paper and paper towels, made even more fun if you "unwind" a little cardboard to get them started.

Comfort Toys

- Soft stuffed animals, which are good for several purposes. For some cats, the stuffed animal should be small enough to carry around. For cats who want to wrestle with the toy, the stuffed animal should be about the same size as the cat. Toys with legs and a tail seem to be especially enticing to cats.
- Cardboard boxes, especially those a little too small for your cat to fit into.

Catnip

- Catnip-filled soft toys, which cats like to kick, carry, and rub. Catnip is not addictive and is perfectly safe for cats to roll in, rub in, or eat.
- Plain catnip can be crushed and sprinkled on the carpet or, for easier cleanup, on a towel placed on the floor. Catnip oils will often stay in the carpet, and although they're not visible to us, your cat will still be able to smell them.
- Catnip sprays rarely have enough power to be attractive to cats.
- Not all cats are affected by catnip. Some cats may become overstimulated to the point of aggressive play and others may become relaxed.
- Kittens under six months old seem to be immune to catnip.

Get the Most out of Toys!

- Rotate your cat's toys weekly by making only a few available at a time. Keep a variety of types easily accessible. If your cat has a favorite, like a soft "baby" that she loves to cuddle with, you may want to leave that one out all the time.
- Provide toys that offer a variety of uses—at least one toy to carry, one to wrestle with, one to roll, and one to "baby."
- Hide-and-seek is a fun game for cats. "Found" toys are often much more attractive than a toy which is obviously introduced.
- Many of your cat's toys should be interactive. Interactive play is very important for your cat because she needs active "people time"—and such play also enhances the bond between you and your pet. Cats generally engage in three types of play—"fishing, flying, and chasing"—and all types are much more engaging for cats when you are part of them.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
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2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037
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