



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor



The feline fun factor – does play matter? Vicky Halls investigates...

This is a time when, traditionally, my New Year resolution has already been broken but – so far so good – I am determined this year to persevere, probably because it involves enormous benefit for very little effort. My goal for 2013 is simply to play more with Mangus.

Mangus, my adorable (elderly) Devon Rex, spends a lot of time sleeping these days but I can always get a spring back in her step if we take the time to play with her favourite 'sparkly stick' or 'furry rat'. Many of you I am sure will know your cats well enough to go straight to a toy that really gets them excited. Or do you...?

So many cat owners equate play with kittens or juveniles: a purposeful activity that hones hunting and fighting skills in preparation for the real thing as adults. It serves to improve co-ordination, physical strength and learning about social communication but remains, for many, applicable only to the young.

I absolutely agree that it is developmentally significant for kittens but its usefulness extends beyond this life stage. Play is important for all companion cats, young and old. It is a glorious leisure activity, it has a positive impact on a cat's emotional state, it aids in the prevention and treatment of obesity, it provides important stimulation for the bored or elderly brain and it helps to develop and maintain social bonds. Little wonder that scheduled playtime forms a very important part of many of the programmes I put in place to tackle 'problem' behaviour.

The art of play however isn't just a question of scattering brightly-coloured pet shop purchases on the living room carpet – there is more to consider here than meets the eye so it may be helpful to look at play in more depth.

Play can be broken down into separate categories:

- Solitary play
- Solitary play (with objects)

- Interactive play (with cats)
- Interactive play (with humans)

Solitary play

There is little we as owners can do to encourage solitary play, it often occurs during the evening or early hours of the morning at a time when cats would naturally be most active. Signs of this type of activity, often referred to as a 'mad half hour', include sudden, staccato movements interspersed with frozen postures with crouched legs and a general look of madness with dilated pupils and ears flattened laterally. The cat may vocalise with a loud prolonged yowl prior to dashing madly from room to room.

Solitary play with objects

Every cat will have specific favourites when it comes to selecting toys for playing alone, these will be based on texture, shape, size, smell, how they move and whether they make a noise while doing so. If you haven't already done so, establishing what stimulates your cat is based on trial and error, although, in my experience, there are some commercially-available toys that have majority appeal. I carry an assortment of toys in my consulting bag that I absolutely guarantee will appeal to all cats I visit. My bag exudes an irresistible fusion of smells accumulated over 15 years (probably impossible to reproduce elsewhere) but I believe in the toys it contains and the power of novelty.

My personal favourites include:

- Yeowww! Catnip Banana
- Small fur mice, some silent, others with a movement-activated squeak
- Kong® Kickeroo – a larger toy that can be grabbed and kicked simultaneously
- My own home-made 'Octopuss' – details to make your own in *Cat Detective** Chapter 11
- Rubbish! – screwed up sweet papers, hair 'scrunchies', plastic lids, paper...

I would also recommend any toy that your cat hasn't seen for a while – so maintain the novelty factor by rotating toys left out regularly.

Interactive play (with cats)

Cats are more likely to indulge in social play in the right kind of environment – full of obstacles and different levels to give camouflage, hidey holes and the chance to leap to high places for 'time out'. Two cats can differ greatly in their motivation to

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the FAB's Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For further information regarding these please visit her website: www.vickyhalls.net Vicky also hosts a cat behaviour Facebook Group and you can join in the cat discussions by searching for 'Vicky Halls Cat Behaviour' from within Facebook.





Photo: istocklibrary.com/Marcin Gil

play and some sessions can lead to one individual becoming over-aroused and boisterous, changing the tone of the game to something akin to a dangerous altercation. This can be extremely stressful for the cat that isn't quite so excitable. Giving both cats the opportunity to break the stare, for example, in social play fighting can diffuse tension and avoid arousal levels from escalating. If you are considering looking at areas within your home that might be conducive to play you may want to provide a combination of stacked cardboard boxes – with entry/exit holes – furniture at various heights, tables and cat activity centres to simulate that all important multi-level play station. This may be sufficient to keep things relatively calm but a little vigilance could alert you to the signs that show one cat is saying "please stop, this isn't fun anymore". These signs include tongue-to-nose licking, exaggerated swallowing, skin twitching, tail flicking, claw swiping, hissing, yowling or attempting to run away. At this point you may want to intervene and distract the boisterous cat by throwing a toy while the other cat executes his or her escape.

Interactive play – with humans

Interactive games with your cat need to be tailored to suit the individual. If your cat is highly motivated to play you will notice that he or she will do so frequently and spontaneously at any time of day and night. You will usually be the one who gets bored first and virtually anything dangled in front of your cat will elicit a response. If this describes your cat then, congratulations, all you have to do is develop the staying power to hang on in there with the games and know that you can have time off by ensuring your cat has plenty of inanimate objects for self-play when you can take no more or are fast asleep.

If your cat has a low motivation to play – as does my dear Mangus – then you have a much harder job on your hands. These cats don't play spontaneously with objects and tend to look at you with clear disdain when you are crouched in

front of them waving a bootlace randomly with something furry tied to the end. These cats are receptive at very specific times, under very specific circumstances and it is highly likely that you will miss the window. There may be only one toy in the universe that excites them – and you need to find it – and they will tire quickly after a great deal of persuasion to start in the first place.

However, don't be defeated; knowing the positive physical and mental benefits of play should spur you on to find that special toy and learn when and where to encourage activity to meet your cat's idiosyncratic needs. You may be most successful with wand toys – 'Da Bird' is a personal favourite – or even using a laser pointer. However, be aware that some games/toys can cause frustration if the pounce and catch parts of the predatory sequence are absent; this is particularly noticeable when using a laser pointer. I would therefore advise that you mimic natural circumstances as closely as possible, for example, play in short bursts of activity and end the game by shining the dot on a toy that can be caught. If your cat appears fearful or continues to search for the 'dot' for prolonged periods afterwards then a laser toy isn't for you and is best avoided.

You will also find that, the more you play the easier it becomes to get your cat 'in the zone'.

Consider your cat's natural body rhythm by establishing the time of day and location that works best. If you have two or more cats, you will have far more success playing on a one-to-one basis, as any social tension will ruin a game before it even starts. Whatever happens, whether your cat is easily excited or not, always end an interactive game on a high point.

The benefit of this particular activity greatly outweighs the small amount of effort it takes for us to make this part of our daily routine, so join in with Mangus and me and 'Get playing!' ●

**Cat Detective* Vicky Halls Bantam Press £7.99