

One Simple Way to Boost Your Cat's Quality of Life

It doesn't require a lot of extra time, and doesn't need to cost a dime, but it's priceless for your cat's health and well-being. Now there's data to support how it may even enhance your relationship with your cat, especially if she's an indoor kitty. Here are some creative ways to get started.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Researchers in Australia have released study results that suggest pet cats encouraged by their guardians to play have a significantly better quality of life than cats who aren't involved in regular playtime
- The study showed that when play is absent, cats demonstrate behavioral changes indicative of stress, frustration, or unease; playtime appears to be a very important factor in both assessing and maintaining the welfare of cats
- It's natural for cats to be active and mentally stimulated — two things playtime delivers in spades; the best way to cure boredom and inappropriate behaviors in your cat is through both interactive and independent play

Unlike dogs, cats are notoriously difficult to read, so it can be challenging to know whether something you're doing (or not doing) with or for your feline family member is improving her health and happiness or is just a waste of time. Whereas dogs tend to provide immediate feedback on our efforts to make them comfortable, happy, well-fed, etc., cats simply aren't wired to respond in the same way.

Fortunately, there are scientists interested in such topics who are conducting research that offers little insights into what makes our favorite felines tick.

Study Says: Cats Just Want to Have Fun

Recently, a team of researchers at the University of Adelaide School of Animal and Veterinary Science in Australia set out to investigate how playtime affects the health and quality of life of pet cats. Does it enhance their welfare? Does it result in closer cat-human bonds?

The team consulted with veterinarians, animal behaviorists, and cat guardians to create an online survey to capture play-related factors associated with feline welfare, using measures that included quality of life, cat-guardian relationship quality, problem behaviors, and behavioral changes.

The researchers investigated these links by applying in-depth empirical methods to analyze data gathered from around the world. The results were published recently in the journal *Animal Welfare*.¹ According to lead study author Julia Henning, a Ph.D. candidate:

"Our survey results, based on responses from 591 cat guardians from 55 countries, indicated greater cat playfulness and more types of games played were significantly associated with better cat quality of life.

Also, longer amounts of daily play, greater number of games, both cat and guardian initiating play, and heightened guardian playfulness were also associated with better quality cat-guardian relationships."²

The researchers also found that exclusively indoor cats have significantly increased quality of life and cat-guardian relationships compared to kitties with (presumably free-roaming) outdoor access.

Lack of Play May Cause Stress and Frustration in Cats

When play was absent, cats demonstrated behavioral changes indicative of stress, frustration, or unease, leading the study authors to conclude that playtime appears to be a very important factor in both assessing a cat's welfare, and maintaining it.

"Play has long been considered beneficial to cats," says Henning. "Pre-existing research links play to cats' long-term neurological, physiological, behavioral, and emotional skills, as well as fitness and general good health."

The researchers acknowledged the limitations of self-reporting surveys, including the fact that cat guardians aren't necessarily skilled at assessing the behavior of their pets. In addition, those who made the time and effort to complete the survey tend to be more invested in their cat's care than the average pet owner, so their responses may not be an accurate representation of the general population.

"Ultimately, we recommend more research is needed. Further investigations could solve exactly how much play and what kind is best suited to achieving improved cat welfare. That would be the cat's meow," says study co-author Susan Hazel, Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer at the University of Adelaide.³

In my opinion, many housecats today are not only overfed and under-exercised, but also extremely bored, and boredom isn't a healthy emotional state for kitties.

Bored cats tend to engage in negative behaviors, including general nutty or wild behavior; chasing their tails or human ankles; continually knocking items off tables, counters, or shelves; excessive vocalization; and attention-seeking behavior (being intentionally annoying).

If one or more of these behaviors rings a bell for you, there's a very good chance your cat could benefit from additional mental stimulation in the form of both interactive and independent playtime.

Interactive Cat Toys

One of the best ways to get an indoor cat active and mentally stimulated, and strengthen the bond shared between cat and guardian, is through interactive play that encourages natural stalking and hunting behaviors. However, since many cats at play tend to have short attention spans, and others become stressed or hyper-aroused, it's a good idea to keep play sessions short.

Set a goal of two or three 10-minute daily sessions, and if possible, do them at the same time each day so your cat learns to look forward to them. Keep a selection of interactive toys on hand, a variety of all natural, chemical-free engaging toys you can use stimulate play. Also invest in a few undyed, natural feather toys, which are irresistible to many kitties.

“You want to get your cat running, leaping and jumping,” explains feline behavior consultant Dr. Marci Koski. “You want to get him engaged in the prey sequence, which is staring, stalking and chasing, pouncing and grabbing, and then performing a kill bite. That will tap into his predatory instincts and let him feel like a cat.”

Another option is the furry little (fake) mice that are such a hit with cats. They’re not the real thing, of course, and your kitty knows it, but they’ll do in a pinch. Look for options made from natural, undyed materials. Cats seem to like the size, texture, and “battability” of the mice. Try flicking one across the floor in front of your cat and see how she reacts.

Many cats also think it’s great fun to chase and swat soap bubbles blown into the air (go with castile soap). And don’t overlook the benefit of catnip toys or silver vine products during play sessions. My cat is really into ping pong balls, as well.

After a play session, Dr. Marci suggests giving your cat a meal (more about this shortly). After he eats, he’ll do a little grooming then settle down for a snooze.

“Hunt, eat, groom, sleep — it’s a very natural pattern for felines,” she explains. “Self-play toys, like little balls and mice, are great, but they’re not going to engage a cat in all four steps of the prey sequence. So, go with an interactive wand toy twice a day.”

And if your cat flops down like he’s really bored after a minute or so, he’s faking. Give him about a 30-second rest and reengage him. What’s happening is he has fallen back into the staring part of the prey sequence. He’s trying to figure out that lure and how to get it. Don’t let him fool you. He still wants to play. Just give him a little break, and then re-engage him with the wand.”

Encouraging Independent Cat Play and Exercise

Climbing, scratching, and stretching are natural feline activities that help keep their bodies well-conditioned and their minds stimulated.

If you don’t have one already, consider purchasing or making an indoor cat tree. Ideally, it should reach from floor to ceiling, be very stable (not wobbly), and should be covered with a variety of materials that will entice kitty to climb, stretch, and claw. If you can place your cat tree near a window, even better.

Cats also enjoy climbing to high perches to watch the world from a safe distance, so make sure the cat tree has at least one. You can also add wall shelves and window seats to give kitty a range of choices.

When cats in the wild feel threatened, they head for trees, dens, or caves to seek safety. Indoor kitties obviously don’t have that option, so their obsession with hiding in boxes may be an adaptation. Studies show access to hiding boxes reduces feline stress, especially in shelter cats.

Many cats also use hiding boxes as cardboard jungle gyms and spend time playing in and around them, so consider placing a few around your home and see what happens! You can also provide brain enrichment and boredom-busting toys they can investigate on their own.

A secure outdoor enclosure offers your indoor kitty the opportunity to experience the outdoors safely and provides both physical and mental stimulation without the risks of free roaming. Depending on where it's located, it can also give her an opportunity to make contact with the earth and ground herself.

Many cat parents are creating safe outdoor enclosures or cat patios that allow their feline family members secure access to the outdoors. The enclosure should be open air, allowing kitty exposure to fresh air and sunlight, but shielded enough to prevent escape or a predator from gaining access.

Another way to get a willing cat outdoors in nice weather is to train her to walk on a harness and leash. This obviously won't be the answer for every cat, but if you feel yours might enjoy going for walks, here are tips for training a cat to walk on a leash.

Turn Mealtime Into Playtime

Because our cats don't have the freedom they would in the wild, it's up to us to find creative ways to allow them to perform the natural behaviors that keep boredom at bay. A great way to do this is to have your kitty hunt for her meals.

One method is to separate her daily portion of food into three to five small meals fed throughout the day in a variety of puzzle toys or indoor hunting feeder mice. If you work outside the home, you can give her two or three food-stuffed toys before you leave the house, then a couple at dinnertime and one at bedtime.

This will encourage her to hunt and eat on a schedule similar to her wild cousins, and as an added bonus, she might just sleep through the night.

Another way to have your cat hunt for food is by hiding her food bowls in various locations around the house. Start with one bowl in the usual spot, and then place additional bowls in other areas where she's sure to find them. You can also do this with puzzle toys.

Sources and References

¹ [Henning, J. et al. Cats just want to have fun: Associations between play and welfare in domestic cats. Animal Welfare, Volume 32, 2023, e9](#)

^{2, 3} [Phys.org, February 3, 2023](#)
