

Think Only Dogs Fetch? Cats Beg to Differ

Groundbreaking study uncovers that fetching isn't just for dogs. Explore how cats are stepping into the game, initiating play on their terms, and why this discovery could change how we interact with our whiskered companions.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent study surveyed the owners of over 1,000 cats who play fetch to determine how the game differs from fetch with dogs
- As it turns out, there are many differences, for example, cats play the game with their humans on their own terms, and most prefer to play with common household items vs. toys
- Playtime is a very important factor in maintaining the welfare of cats; it's natural for felines 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

The game of fetch is typically associated with canine companions (even though many dogs never quite get the hang of it, and others are completely uninterested), but a recent study shows that some cats also enjoy retrieving thrown items.

Cats Playing Fetch

The study (actually a survey) of 924 cat guardians was published a few months ago in Scientific Reports and documents fetching behaviors in 1,154 cats the survey takers either currently or once owned.¹ The survey asked owners questions about how their cats' fetching first occurred, how often it occurs per month, the objects fetched, and who usually initiated or ended fetch sessions. The survey results showed that:

- 59% of fetching kitties played the game up to 10 times a month
- 55% fetched objects up to five times during their most recent play session
- Cats initiated and ended games of fetch more often than their humans
- Cats tended to play more often and for longer periods when they, rather than their owners, initiated games, as well as when their owners ended games
- Most of the surveyed owners (94%) reported their cat began playing fetch without being trained to do so
- 61% of cats first started fetching as kittens under a year old
- Just 23% of cats lived with a dog or another cat who fetched, so it's unlikely they learned the behavior from another animal

- Out of 160 purebred cats in the group, Siamese were the most frequently reported fetching breed (36 cats), followed by Bengal (16) and Ragdoll (12)
- Cat toys accounted for just under 40% of objects the cats chose to play fetch with; the majority were common household objects such as hair ties or bottle parts, or items thrown opportunistically by owners, such as crumpled paper
- Common locations for games of fetch were bedrooms and stairs

The study shows that cats being cats, games of fetch must be played on their terms, and they learn to do it because they want to, not because they're trained to!

More Ways to Get Your Cat Moving

If your cat doesn't play fetch much or at all, there are other ways you can help him get him moving ... and you should definitely make the effort. 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.

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, such as the Coco Crazy Cat Pack, 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.

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.

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**.

Sources and References

[Phys.org, December 14, 2023](#)

¹ [Forman, J. et al. Scientific Reports, Volume 13, Article number: 20456 \(2023\), published December 14, 2023](#)
