

What's Play Got To Do With It? By Jackson Galaxy

As you pass innocently by a doorway, your cat pounces fiercely on your ankle, gnawing and clawing until blood is drawn and then bolting away under the bed. Two littermates, now six years old, suddenly start fighting and now can't be in the same room together anymore. Perhaps your cat is vocalizing so loudly at 4:00 A.M. that you seriously wish that you had become a tropical fish nut somewhere along the line.

So what *does* play have to do with it? Why do we have to interfere in activities that cats seem to occupy themselves with quite naturally? After all, a cat simply needs a plastic ring from a gallon bottle, a piece of fuzz from the carpet, oftentimes something completely invisible to our eyes, and they're off to the races!

In reality, there are good reasons for us to "interfere." Let's start by looking at ourselves as humans. Doctors and psychologists constantly tell us that we need to "play" more, however we define it. They urge us to exercise, not only to keep our bodies in shape, but for the mental, stress-relieving benefits of physical exertion. And they harangue us to leave space in our lives for things other than work: have a picnic lunch in the park, do yoga, play softball, learn to play piano—the options are endless. Without time for play, our physical *and* mental states are at risk.

As children, we had recess time at school to vent the steam that built up from sitting still for so long. We ran around the playground or climbed the monkey bars, then came back inside and once again, sat still and tried to be good. However, as we became adults, we learned to suppress the need for recess, and to just live with the stress. This has not been good for us! During the breakneck speed of economic growth in the 80's in Japan, businesses were faced with a new fatal malady affecting their workers, which coroners coined a name for, roughly translated to English, meaning *worked to death*.

Much of the stress in our modern lives arises from our feelings that we cannot control our environments. Instead, we feel *controlled by* our boss, traffic, family obligations, or doctor's orders. It has been shown scientifically that animals, too, feel much more stress when they are helpless to change the conditions of their

lives. How can we expect anything else from our cats? Their stress sources are far less under their control than our own, and their stress outlets are limited.



There are two important factors to consider. First, the stressors that cats experience on a daily basis, and second, the outlets—how cats manifest (or hide) that stress:

Stressors

- **Territorial infringement:**
If you have more than one cat, or a dog, or two or four, children, etc., or any other being that doesn't respect the territorial boundaries that your cat has set in his or her mind, that results in stress on your cat. Remember that territory is everything in the mind of Cat. In a multicat home, through a hierarchical system we still don't fully understand, cats typically develop a system of "time sharing," or rotating favored areas to increase their greater sense of space. But this is a line walked very delicately. Simply put, the more beings we squeeze into a space, the more psychological pressure is placed on the cat. When we urbanized as a culture and made our cats mostly indoors, we decreased their natural sense of territory by about 90%. Now imagine adding another cat or dog or significant other into the mix. I'd call that stress!



- **Disruption In Routine**
The concept of "stable sameness" is crucial within the larger framework of territory. According to cats, things must happen in roughly the same way, at the same time, every day. Surprises are not welcome! Whether it be feeding time, comings and goings of human family members, the sofa being in the same place this morning as it was last night (ever try a little furniture rearranging and *not* have the cats act like you've moved to the moon?), or the contents or contexts of their food and litter—routine is key. As you'll soon see, the stress that disruptions in routine can bring can be wonderfully soothed with play therapy.

- **The Big Zero**

That's right, *nothing* can be a huge stressor. Sure, cats sleep between 12-16 hours average daily. In reality, what we're seeing is the resting phase of the wild dusk-to-dawn hunter lurking within our furry friends. Cats are like energetic balloons, filling with electricity as they rest. A hunter with no prey to stalk is like a kid without recess—bored, edgy, and looking for trouble!

- **Other Miscellaneous Nuisances**

Some other highly bothersome problems to our felines include:

1. Construction in the home, or workers like plumbers or roofers invading their space and making unusual noise.
2. Neighborhood cats. These can present a problem just by being seen through a window, but they really drive indoor cats nuts by spraying on the outside of the house or doors of the apartment.
3. Newborns and the highly unfamiliar sounds they make, let alone the attention they demand that suddenly is not going to the cat.
4. Outsiders coming for dinner, holiday, or long visits, even if the cat knows and likes them. It's still a disruption.

All these contribute to the “static” that routinely builds up in a cat's body day after day. There doesn't even have to be a significant episode like any of the ones I've mentioned. The causes can reside in these categories but be subtle, just little “straws” of stress that build up over time.



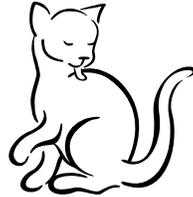
Outlets

As you will see, outlets or manifestations of stress can range from the barely noticeable to the extreme.

- **Internalized Stress**

Watch for the “filling of the energetic balloon” as discussed above. Some symptoms that your cat is taking in more than he or she can handle are:

1. **Displaced Grooming** — As opposed to the relaxed grooming that can take up to two or three hours of your cat's day, this will look more like striding into a room, stopping mid-pace, and suddenly licking, almost purposefully, as if to get a flea off of her body. This is a quick movement, and usually seen around the shoulder area.



2. **“Back Electricity”** — For lack of a better term—it's when you touch the cat and can see ripples of skin and muscle shoot down the length of his or her back.



3. **Tail Twitch/Wag** — See a pattern emerging? This action is another attempt to release energy, anxiety, or—as a twitch graduates to a full wag—possibly a signal of pending aggression.
4. **Somaticizing** — A psychological term that implies converting emotional distress to bodily symptoms. This covers much of what we've discussed, but also implies stress as a factor in a wider spectrum of over-grooming and other obsessive-compulsive disorders, vomiting, appetite disorders, and a number of chronic medical problems.

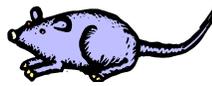
- **Externalized Stress**

More extroverted cats can (and probably will) act out their stress in one of the following ways:

1. **Play Aggression**

Yes, that's why your ankles get bit when you're walking down the hallway, or feet get attacked while you're sleeping. This is not true of all aggressive behavior by any means, but think of the circumstances. To a cat, ***play and prey are the same thing!*** Just before the cat jumped your ankle, she was, in her mind, lying in wait in the tall grass, waiting for her prey (which would be just ankle height), and WHAM!

These actions are not spiteful, just misdirected. We will learn how to direct them, never fear.



2. Redirected Aggression

One way of letting off steam in a multicat home is to take it out on the other cats, especially if that is in the nature of the individual cat—one who tends to seek a battle rather than to hide and internalize.

“Redirected” means that the cat who got whacked just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time—right in the way of the stressed cat’s explosion. Once an incident like this occurs, it can take a long time to normalize relations again. Stress is not usually the major cause of redirected aggression, but heightened stress levels most certainly can help precipitate an event.



3. The Usual Suspects

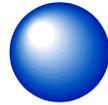
Stress plays a part in many litterbox problems, scratching furniture, and middle-of-the-night vocalizing. The idea to underscore here is that it plays a *part*. These are all help topics within themselves, and all have many sources of causation. Stress *alone* doesn’t often cause these problems to continue, but it is usually a contributor.

Recess Time-Let’s Play!

The first step toward establishing a difference between casually playing with your cat and *play therapy* is *routine*. As I’ve stressed, your cat likes things to happen in a structured daily manner. The idea is to observe his or her energy patterns. Most likely, they will mirror that of the family’s. When the family’s activity level is on the go, the cats will probably be too. Dinnertime seems, from my experience to be a “gimme” time for cat attention, as does bedtime. Anticipating play about a half hour before bed is a great idea, because it will help you get a better night’s sleep, for those of you who are getting your toes attacked at 4:00 am, or are victim to some other type of attention-getting dawn activity. Once you’ve established routine, it’s imperative to stick to it. In time, your cat will look forward to that specific time of day as a child looks forward to the recess bell.

Next, let's establish the best *type of toy* for play therapy. Basically, toys fall into two categories:

- 1) **Remote Toys** - This is any toy that can be thrown, played fetch with, and usually disappears under the couch or refrigerator and reappear during next years spring cleaning. Examples are sparkle balls, crinkle balls, furry mice, and those odd geometric rubber balls. All are great for other purposes, but not the one at hand.



- 2) **Interactive Toys**- Anything connected to you will keep your cat's interest for exponentially longer periods of time than remote toys. Some examples of fine interactive toys are Cat Dancers, Cat Charmers, or imaginative ones that you can make at home using a stick, string, and toys at the end. For our purposes, I'm going to suggest a specific toy that I've used successfully with hundreds of cats, many of whom swore, "My cat just doesn't like to play." It's called **Da Bird**. It's a fishing pole toy with a unique feather configuration at the end of it. What makes it so great is that, when you swing it through the air, the feathers flutter and make the sound of flapping wings. You just can't get better than that when trying to tap into a cat's play/prey nerve center.

Be The Bird!

Now, it's time for some role-playing on your part. It's not enough to dangle the toy while watching TV. That won't generate the desired play-time rapture from your feline buddy. You have to *be the bird!* When you wave the toy through the air, imagine what's going on in your cat's mind. If you've seen cats perch in the window watching birds in trees for hours on end, you know their patient hunting capabilities. Let the cat follow the pattern of flight around the room long enough to get completely involved in it. You'll see wide-eyed, rapt attention, tensing muscles, and maybe a twitch at the end of the tail. Talking to the cat in a light praising tone, asking "What is that?" or encouraging the cat to go after the toy, always helps to arouse the curiosity.

Now it's time to make the mistake that all bird victims eventually make to our expert hunters, and that is swooping too low, just low enough for the cat to make a grab. This is a crucial part of the game, because if this were truly a hunt, the bird would play dead, and the cat might go through a series of actions. Difficult as this is to describe in writing, it's important to play dead, yet not let the slack completely go in the string connecting the wand and the feathers. Allowing the string to dangle may distract the cat to watch the string and not the prey.



Don't be fooled by wily feline hunting techniques; often they will walk away or seem disinterested at this point, but that is merely how cats test the "deadness" of their prey. Wait a few seconds and start to slowly wriggle the feathers. That should get your friend's attention, and if the cat doesn't pounce in time, then off you go again, flying around the room.

Sometimes the cat will pick the prey up in her mouth and start to walk away. Allow this and follow her; she won't go far. And, as the bird, keep watching for your chance to "escape" again.

Remember that in your role as the bird, every time the cat lays a paw on you, it does injure you to some degree, so each "capture" should affect how fast you get away. You'll probably also get to see a wider range of the cats' hunting postures, like the dilated pupils hiding under a table, the "head bob" as they size up the exact dimensions of their kill, and the famous "butt wiggle" right before the pounce. These are innate gestures that let you know that you are on the right track; you're playing your role like an avian Hamlet.

As you, the bird, become less able to fly, seek refuge more on the ground, trying to sneak off behind a couch, around a corner, or into other sheltered areas. This is when your cat will usually go in for the kill. You're aiming for the all-four-paw-wrap-around with back paws kicking and teeth biting. Put up a mild struggle, but at the same time encourage his or her success.



This whole routine can be repeated, of course, *ad infinitum*, until the cat is finished. But watch out for the "second wind!" Just when you think the game should be over, and your cat is lying on his or her side lazily batting or altogether ignoring the toy, the second you go to put it away, he may suddenly pop up for another round. By all means, indulge him!

Play therapy can be highly successful in multicat households. Depending on the personalities involved, cats can be worked with individually or in groups. If you're doing "group therapy," make sure that everyone gets a chance to make a catch

and a kill. Some cats are more inclined to watch than participate, but make sure even by-standers get to take a swat by swinging the toy in their direction now and then.

The Coup d'Etat

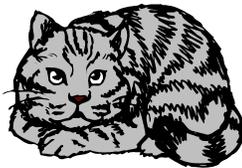
The final step in recreating a play/prey session is eating! Not full meals, of course, but choose a high protein wet food snack. Kitten food or even a meat baby food would do just fine. This completes the natural cycle of hunt-kill-eat.



It's important, once the session is over, that you put away the special play therapy toy somewhere that your cat can't have access to it. Eventually, you'll see a sort of conditioned response to the toy coming out. In other words, your cat will hear the sound of the fishing pole coming out of the closet and make the immediate association between it and the venting of energies, the constant praise and connected time with you, and the tasty treat that follows.

Of course, there are many variables in play routines. Cats are individuals and dependent on their experience to a degree; they will approach this encounter in different ways. The general idea remains consistent, however, and that is to wear them out, not just aerobically but in their minds, in the primal hunter nature. A few of these variables include

- **The “my cat doesn't play” syndrome.**
This is seen most often in sedentary, obese, or elderly cats. Play, however doesn't always appear exactly how I've outlined it. Showing interest, batting a paw at the feathers, just getting up and following it around for a few minutes is a great start. You'll most likely see greater interest and action as time goes by. *Any* activity is far better than none.



- **The length of a given session.**
The average time reported by my clients is approximately 15-20 minutes per session. There are some cats who can go for 45 minutes and never lose interest for a millisecond, or 5 minutes can work. It is optimal to have two sessions a day.

Some Final Thoughts:

- **Remember The Power Of Praise!**

Just as I mentioned that connecting on a physical level via the fishing pole increases the cat's attention span in the game, so does your constant praising—staying in the game not just with your body, but with your voice as well. It's a deep misconception, I believe, that cats don't seek at least *some* approval from us.

- **Making Time In Our Busy Lives**

We all have jobs, school, families, and stresses of our own without trying to make time to schedule play sessions with our cats twice a day. However, the benefits are immediate and innumerable to both cat and human. Not only will stress be lowered in both species by making space in the day for a little "pussyfooting," but by sticking with the program, and remembering that getting a cat to accept and follow a new behavioral routine will take an average of 12-16 weeks. Many problem behaviors will diminish greatly over that time, especially those associated with the play/prey drive. Ankle biting, timidity, nervous irritability, sneak attacks on your feet while sleeping, and many others will be effectively diminished. Last and certainly not least, the bond between you and your pet will be deepened in a new way, and that's something that's worth the effort!



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