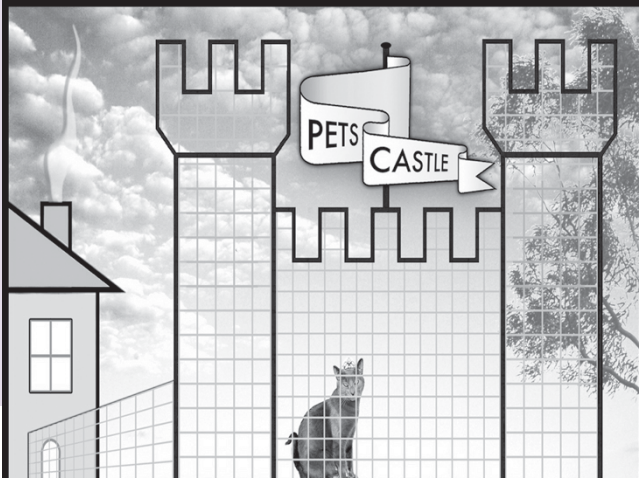


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Cats and the Importance of Play



Brad Kollus looks at how play can be beneficial to you and your feline friends

This quotation is as true today as it was when it was written 500 hundred years ago. Playing with our cats is one of the great joys and benefits of having a cat, for both our cats and ourselves. Cats play with each other (social play) and with objects sometimes manipulated by their humans (object play). The reasons for each type of play are quite different. This article explores object play.

Why Do Cats Play?

If our cats are well fed then why do they continue hunting their toy mice and chasing feathers at the end of wands? Dr. Sarah Hall Ph.D looked at this question in 'Object Play by Adult Animals' published in Animal Play. Dr. Hall studied the play patterns of domestic cats while at the Anthrozoology Institute, School of Biological Sciences at the University of Southampton in England. She found hungry cats were more likely to play with objects than those that had just been fed. This demonstrates the play motivation in adult house cats is linked to their instinct to hunt.

In another study Dr. Hall examined what determines the intensity of cats' play. She found two factors which determine how long cats play. One is the length of time between play sessions. Cats play more intensively when they have short intervals between play sessions. Second, is the overall sensory value of a toy. The more a toy stimulates cats' senses, the more likely they will play.

Other studies on the effects play has on an animal's brain chemistry have shown that when an individual realises play is about to begin their brain releases chemicals to stimulate the animal. When play begins the brain again releases chemicals that provide pleasure to the animal while it plays. All this has evolved so our cats will hunt and survive. It works like this: Your cat sees a mouse moving, either real or at the end of a wand your holding, its brain releases stimulants which excite the cat and ready it for the chase. As it begins to play or hunt, whether for fun or survival, its brain releases chemicals giving it pleasure.

Best Ways To Play

Pam Johnson-Bennett, a US based feline behaviorist, author of multiple award winning books on cat behavior including Think Like A Cat, and a former Veterinary Technician recommends simulating the movement of a cat's prey with your toy to entice them into playing. "I try to imitate something real based on the type of toy I am using; if I am using a bird-type toy I try to make the movements like a bird. If I am using a toy like the 'Cat Dancer,' I move that like a fly which would be very erratic," said Johnson-Bennett. Cats respond to fast, erratic moving toys which move away from them, similar to prey. Bennett also recommends stopping the toy's motion, because a toy in continual motion can be frustrating for a cat. It is natural for cats to stalk their prey, wait for them to stop moving and then pounce on their prey.

It is also important to give your cat successes "I do many little captures so the cat does not get frustrated and I may let him hold it there for a couple seconds and then I start to move it away, but I always let him have that great, grand capture at the end," said Johnson-Bennett.

Good for Mental and Physical Health

Practice for hunting is not the only reasons cats play. "I think they enjoy it," says Dr. Marc Bekoff Ph.D of the University of Colorado's Department of Biology, an expert in animal play and author of Minding Animals. "They play evolutionarily because it serves many important functions," says Dr. Bekoff. He says that play in animals is important to their physical, emotional, and cognitive development.

Play also turns out to be a good indicator of cat's health. "I have talked to rescue organisations and one of the great litmus tests they use to determine if an animal's well-being is compromised is to see whether they have stopped playing. The British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals now has a six level scale of which measures well-being for animals. Play is one of them. If you do not see play you may be dealing with an animal who is not physically or mentally well," said Dr. Bekoff. He continues to say that besides helping keep our cats physically fit, studies have shown that young animals deprived of play have suffered emotionally, cognitively, and physically. Studies have also shown that play not only stimulates an animal's brain, but helps it develop its ability to handle stress, improves the animals cognitive ability, and increases its creative power. Play is an indicator and component of our cat's health.

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Equally Good for People

Play can be equally beneficial for cat owners. 'In Between Pets and People', Dr.'s Alan Beck Ph.D, Executive Director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University, and Aaron Katcher MD, Professor Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania write about how play with pets is very special because it is non-competitive. There are no winners or losers. In addition, the silly antics our pets engage in while playing often make us laugh. It's an escape from the stresses of everyday life. Playing with pets can be very beneficial for people physically, mentally, and emotionally. Besides being fun for both owners and cats strengthening the feline-human bond is one of the most important outcomes of interactive play.

The Politics of Play

Other effects of play may have more far reaching impact. Dr. Leslie Irvine Ph.D, of the University of Colorado's Department of Sociology recently wrote about how playing with our cats and dogs may affect society in her paper 'The Power of Play', published in the academic journal Anthrozoos. "In play we begin to see our animals as having subjective capabilities and sometimes even a capacity to share intentions with us. These are all elements of play. If we begin to see our animals as having these capacities then that potentially breaks down the boundaries between humans and animals," said Dr. Irvine.

When we play with our cats, it is an example of what Dr. Irvine calls a 'political micropractice', an everyday event which can have cumulative long term political consequences. "Play with animals is wonderfully non-competitive. It puts us on a level where there is no need to dominate them", said Dr. Irvine. Play is one 'micropractice' where we are on equal terms with our cats. This may in the long run change how society views animals.

Science has demonstrated what cats and owners have known for hundreds of years. Interactive play is good for each player. The challenge is to find the time every day to enjoy these benefits.

Sit Happens

Tips & Techniques for Training Your Pet



Photo by Animax

Trudi Thorpe - dogLOGIC

Trudi Thorpe runs a dog behaviour and training company dogLOGIC based in Sydney. As Trudi says "DOGS DOGS DOGS...A childhood obsession that I never grew out of." She devises and implements individual behavioural strategies and obedience techniques based on 18 years of studying dog problems and problem dogs.

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Ask Trudi a question regarding behaviour by emailing behaviour@urbananimal.net

Hi Trudi,

We have a 1 year old Jack Russell Terrier called Rolf who is pretty good around the house with us, but not so good when we take him out. He is very excitable and doesn't listen to us whether he is on his a lead or not. If he is on a lead, he pulls left, right and centre. If we go to a park and let him off lead, he wont come back when we call him.

We took him to a picnic last weekend, and he was terrible. He kept getting into the food, jumping all over the picnic rugs and knocking things over until we had no choice but to tie him up. He then barked and cried and jumped around on the end of the lead which made things very unpleasant for him and for us.

One of the reasons that we picked a small breed over a large one was we wanted to be able to include him in all the things that we did and thought a smaller dog would be easier to have around, but it would seem that that's just not the case.

I would love your advice on our situation. Do you think that he could be trained, given that he doesn't seem to be able to concentrate on anything for very long?

Kelly.

Hi Kelly.

Jack Russell Terriers are great little dogs, but like all breeds (big or small) - they require a certain amount of training. Smaller breeds tend to be treated differently to bigger breeds because of their size and the common perception that they don't require as much training.

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Size matters - but so do other factors. The size of the dog often has very little to do with the suitability of that particular breed to your circumstances. In fact one of the most important things when it comes to training is not only understanding the breed and what exactly it was originally bred to do, but also taking this into consideration when it comes to training.

Jack Russell Terriers are tenacious little pocket rockets, bred to hunt, dig and chase relentlessly, so this needs to be taken into consideration when 'taming' your pup's behaviour.

Rolf won't instinctively know or learn how to act and behave the way you would like him to. He will only ever understand what you have taught him, so it would be a great idea to do some training classes with him. Not only will it help him understand what is expected of him, it will also help you to understand what is required to have the well-mannered dog that you wish for.

As for his attention and concentration, you will find the more training you do with him, the more he will focus on you. Jack Russell Terriers may be enthusiastic little dogs, but they are very bright and respond very well to training.

Hi Trudi,

I have a 17 month old Hungarian Vizsla called Archer, who is generally well behaved except for when he is off lead in a park and spots a bird, and then he's off at full speed after it and no amount of calling him can get him back. He is not aggressive and only wants to chase it, but I'm afraid that if the bird flies across a road, he will follow - oblivious to any danger. If there are no birds around, he will mostly come when called. How can I get him to come to me EVERY TIME I call him?

David Knowles

Hi David,

Archer needs to understand exactly what you want him to do when you call him in. Dogs first need to be taught what a word means along with the desired action, and although you may think that he knows what you want him to do when you call him, the fact is that every time Archer takes off and you repeatedly call him even when you know he will not come back, you inadvertently reinforce the fact that he doesn't HAVE to come back.

Try calling him to you randomly at home using a different word (if you have been using 'come', try 'here') when he comes over, reward him. This effectively teaches the dog a word and the desired action. Once he has the concept, take it outside but continue his training in a controlled environment on lead until you feel he is 100% competent at coming to you. Introduce a release word so that on your walk you are calling him in and then releasing him back out to end of the lead so that he never associates the recall with a negative like 'going home' or 'end of play'.

Once accomplished, it's time to head to the park. Avoid the park that you have been going to, and if possible find an enclosed area that is quiet and without distraction, and repeat the training in the new environment - on lead to start and then off lead. If you find that Archer's response to the recall diminishes with the amount of freedom you afford him, you can capitalise on his natural chase instinct and call him to you, then move off in the opposite direction (the quicker the better) and reward lavishly when he comes in.

It's worth noting that throughout recall training - it is imperative that you don't become frustrated at any time, as your dog may well associate any negative response from you with the fact that he actually came when you called him.