



## Scott Veterinary Clinic – Brantford

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## Kitten Behavior and Training – Play and Investigative Behaviors

### **Kittens have a reputation for being playful. Why is play so important to them?**

Animals of all ages can benefit from opportunities to play. Young developing animals typically engage in play more frequently over the course of their day than adults do.

During play, kittens learn to coordinate their motor skills, including skills that can help with hunting (e.g., chasing and pouncing behaviors). Through play, kittens learn important communication skills needed for healthy relationships with other cats throughout their life.

The nature of kitten play changes as they develop. Before weaning, kittens primarily play with their littermates and mother. As they approach their time of weaning, kittens show more interest toward objects in their environment. They begin to demonstrate behaviors associated with hunting, such as batting at, chasing after, and stalking objects that move. This “object play” supports the development of strong eye-paw coordination as well as good hunting skills.

Physical play is important for the development of balance and agility – all kittens need appropriate outlets for play.

### **I have a 6-week-old kitten that is very playful. How can I channel his play onto toys rather than the curtains and furniture?**

Kittens do not recognize that curtains and furniture are not toys, and damage may occur in the name of fun. All kittens need careful supervision to learn how to play appropriately within your home.

Provide a wide variety of toys so your kitten can practice important play skills. Rotate the toys so they remain interesting. Kittens should have toys they can “hunt”, pounce on, and bat around. Toys can be hidden inside play tunnels or cardboard boxes to satisfy the need to explore. Also, be sure to provide plenty of interactive play (games in which you participate). Create “prey” using a wand or by wriggling toys so they move erratically. Most kittens try to climb as they explore their world. Be sure to provide acceptable surfaces for climbing or accessing vertical vantage points – cat trees are ideal options.

When your kitten starts to engage in unwanted play behavior, distract them and immediately offer a suitable substitute behavior. If your cat playfully climbs curtains, consider closing off the room except when you are available to supervise. When you are unable to supervise at all, confine your kitten in a safe area to prevent her from establishing unwanted play preferences. Her confinement area should have plenty of toys, scratching posts, resting places, a litter box, food, and water.

## Why is my kitten always getting into mischief?

It is normal for young, developing kittens to use their paws, claws and teeth to interact with their environment. In the course of exploring and learning, kittens may inadvertently damage items or injure themselves. Furniture and books may be nibbled or scratched by a kitten's sharp claws, and valuable objects may be broken if they are batted about.

It is difficult to anticipate a kitten's moves – kittens are fast. Try putting your valuable or fragile items away when your kitten is in the area. Child locks and secure containers can be used to keep your cat out of cupboards or garbage cans. Remember, even small kittens can jump and climb, reaching fragile or dangerous items that are above floor level .

Be sure to provide plenty of opportunities to play with appropriate toys or objects that are interesting yet unbreakable. If you notice your kitten is about to engage with something valuable or fragile, lure her away with an appealing treat or toy. See the handout "Behavior Management Products for Cats" for further information.

When you can't supervise, confine your kitten in a safe room with toys, a scratching post, cozy places to rest, food and water, and a litter box. (See handout "Life Skills for Pets: Crate Training and Confinement for Kittens and Cats" for details).

## What is the best way to play with my kitten?

Kittens routinely play with a variety of objects that mimic their prey. Do not allow your kitten to play with any objects small enough to be ingested as an intestinal blockage could occur. Similarly, do not allow your kitten to play with string or yarn unless you are supervising carefully and can remove the string before it is ingested.

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There are plenty of fun toys that can be used for playing with kittens. Interactive wand toys such as the Feline Flyer™, Cat Dancer™, and Da Bird™ allow you to play safely with your kitten. A small fleece toy is great for creating a game of fetch.

Always use a toy when playing with your kitten. Do not allow your kitten to bat at your hands or any other part of your body. As your kitten grows stronger, there is a risk her claws or teeth will penetrate your skin and cause injury. Any injury caused by a cat, even when accidental, is considered serious, as cat bites and scratches often lead to infections.

## How can overexuberant play and play attacks toward people be managed?

Many kittens playfully pounce on people. They may stare at a hand or foot, anticipating a slight movement, and quickly pounce and grasp. Kittens have been known to crouch, frozen in position, waiting to pounce on a person walking by.

To reduce the risk of your kitten targeting your body, always use a toy during planned play sessions and never use your body. Do not tease your kitten with your hands, feet, or clothing and avoid running away if they do chase.

It is only natural for you (the "prey") to quickly retract your hand or foot (in pain), thereby further stimulating the kitten to pursue. Once the behavior has started, it may continue, as it is innately rewarding for kittens to pounce.

To avoid this reinforcement, it is important to be prepared and anticipate your kitten's next move. If you notice your kitten staring at your hand, try to use your other hand to toss a toy or treat in the other direction. If your kitten likes to ambush you as you walk, carry ping pong balls that can be tossed for your kitten to chase. Soon, instead of pouncing on you when she notices your movement, she will likely get ready for the toy or treat toss.

If you are playing with your cat and the play becomes too rough, quietly disengage and allow the kitten to play on her own. If needed, step out of the room briefly to give your kitten a chance to unwind.

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