

Cats Just Want to Have Fun

By understanding your kitten's penchant for play, you can create an interesting and stimulating environment for your pet.

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A kitten has few characteristics more captivating than its playfulness. Watch any kitten, or group of kittens, and you're sure to see some serious fun—rolling, racing, chasing, pouncing, batting, leaping—nonstop, at high speeds like a streak of lightning through your living room, up the stairs, down the stairs and into the kitchen. Yes, watching kittens play is a kick. However, there is a slightly serious side. Physically, play strengthens muscles, develops eye-paw coordination and keeps kittens fit, toned and at a proper weight. And, play may actually help a kitten's brain develop, according to veterinary behaviorist Vint Virga, DVM, in Ithaca, N.Y. "[Play] facilitates the development of neurological pathways that are associated with hunting behavior, social behaviors and other behaviors."

Different Forms of Play The definitive answer as to why kittens play is still pending. However, researchers speculate that play is the way kittens experiment with normal, adult, feline behaviors such as hunting, social interaction, sexual behaviors and evading predators. "Play is a very important mammalian behavior," said veterinary behaviorist Stefanie Schwartz, DVM, in Norwell, Mass. "It has many functions, but we think the most important is that it allows the young animal to practice behaviors that will become important as part of its adult repertoire." There are two primary types of kitten play: object play and social play. Initially, kittens engage in group or social play and, as they develop, progress toward solitary, object play. Patrick Melese, DVM, a veterinarian in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., said that social play which involves chasing, rolling, pouncing, and leaping starts at about 3 weeks of age with gentle pawing and progresses to biting. It peaks by about 12 weeks of age, then declines toward week 16 when there seems to be less desire for social contact with other cats.