

Over-Eager Playmate

How much playtime is enough? A feline behaviorist shares expert tips.

Pam Johnson-Bennett

Q: I adopted Gizmo from a family who did not want her. She is a delightful little thing, very playful and affectionate. She wakes me quite early every morning to play. The problem is, after a 20-minute session with the Fur Mouse, she eats breakfast and wants to play again. And again. I have learned to say "no" but she has been "talking" a lot more lately. Is saying "no" enough?

Feline behaviorist Pam Johnson-Bennett, author of *Think Like a Cat*, says:
You didn't mention the cat's age. If she is under a year old then this behavior is totally normal for a growing, energetic kitten.

In the wild, cats would have several opportunities each day to hunt. The typical cat engages in about 12 hunts a day although not all of them result in the capture of prey. For a young indoor cat, the problem of boredom becomes a real issue; you have to be creative in making sure your kitty gets several mock hunting opportunities.

I would suggest you conduct three or four interactive play sessions each day. Perhaps do one first thing in the morning and then a short one right before you leave the apartment. Do one when you get home at night and then another right before bed. If you get on a schedule of interactive playtime then the cat often adjusts to this and her knows to expect them at certain times. It's also important to wind the action down at the end of the play session to leave the cat relaxed. Many times I find owners make the mistake of abruptly ending the game and that leaves the kitty too revved up.

You can also divide up her food so you are feeding her several small meals a day that are offered after play sessions. This becomes the reward of the feast after the hunt. This is natural for a cat and will also encourage relaxation because kitties normally groom and then rest after ingesting their prey.

It sounds as if you have done a great job of trying to create interesting games for your kitty around the house. You can also do things such as creating paper bag tunnels or hiding dry food in Play-n-Treat balls. I especially love to use Play-n-Treat balls with cats because it gives them a fun activity and they get the reward of the food. These are plastic hollow balls with a hole in them. You fill the ball halfway with dry food and as the cat rolls the ball around a piece or two of kibble will fall out. You can find Play-n-Treat balls at pet supply stores.

Best,
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