

Benefits of Interactive Play

A feline behavior expert explains why you should make time to play with your new kitten.

Pam Johnson-Bennett

Q: Why is interactive play so important for kittens?

Feline behaviorist Pam Johnson-Bennett, author of *Think Like a Cat*, says: Interactive play is an important training tool. It teaches kittens what is and isn't appropriate to bite. All too often, the reason an adult cat is a "biter" is because he was allowed to bite fingers when he was a kitten. Owners often make the mistake of using their fingers as toys and that sets the cat up to get mixed messages. If you use a fishing pole toy, it puts a distance between the cat's teeth and your fingers and this way, the kitten can bite, pounce and have a great time without having to worry about getting your finger confused with the toy. Interactive play is also a wonderful confidence-builder. By using a fishing pole toy, you are simulating a natural hunt. You can slow down or speed up the action for the kitten. You can hide the toy and then let it peek out from behind a chair so the kitten can start learning to stalk and pounce. This type of play engages the kitten both physically and mentally and that's important. As you get to know your new kitten, one terrific way to develop the bond is through interactive playtime. He gets to have lots of fun and develop confidence while associating you with the great time. If the kitten is frightened or shy, it's a wonderful way to help him to blossom and develop trust. Although it may seem as if a kitten would play with a speck of lint and wouldn't need much help from an owner, interactive playtime is an important training technique that when started early, may help avoid potential behavior problems later in life. Too many adult cats don't get enough stimulation throughout the day and end up engaging in destructive behavior or they become sedentary and depressed. If you start your kitten on a healthy schedule of interactive play, you'll both be developing good habits that'll become second nature as the cat matures. With their endless supply of energy, kittens can sometimes get into things they shouldn't. Several short interactive play sessions a day can help satisfy the kitten and work off that energy in a way that is safe.