

Float Like a Butterfly...

CHANNELING PREDATORY PLAY AGGRESSION

He's young and lean and hides in the shadows. Silently, he waits for the most opportune moment to dart out and launch his attack on passing ankles and calves. He's...your cat!

Catch as Cats Can

When left to fend for themselves, feral cats, barn cats and outdoor cats hunt birds, insects and small mammals to survive. According to the July 1995 issue of *Catnip*, a publication of Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, "The cat has evolved into a superb spotter, tracker and pouncer. Cats have highly developed acuity of vision for movement." These skills of stalking, lying in wait, pouncing and, especially, killing are taught to them by their mothers. The feline who merely "plays" with prey probably didn't get lessons from Mom.

Kittens with hunting mothers may show preliminary skills in the art of the kill at just four weeks. It is understandable, then, that the average, pampered young household tabby redirects these energies to his unsuspecting human caretaker's body parts. The most intense and frequent of these misdirected attacks occur during late kittenhood and adolescence (a stage of peak feline fitness and energy), leveling off or ending by adulthood at 1-1/2 to 2 years of age.

Take heart – we rarely hear complaints on the ASPCA Behavior Helpline about bedtime "twitching toe attacks" beyond Simba's second summer. But there's no need to just grin and bear it until the cat matures. The answer lies in redirecting the predatory-play behavior. In other words, divert the cat's interest to something that appears to be alive (to the cat, anyway) but won't be hurt by that fast flurry of teeth and nails.

Living It Up

It is up to a cat's human family to engage the cat in interactive play throughout the animal's life. This is achieved by using toys that can float, twirl, dart and fly in ways that simulate live prey. The human puts life into the toy by dragging it on the floor, dangling it from a wire, swooshing it on the end of a dowel or other such imaginative motions. Wiggling fingers should never be used as they only encourage aggression toward human flesh.

Interactive toys such as the Cat Dancer™, feather wands or Kitty Tease™ can be purchased at pet supply stores. Do-it-yourselfers can easily make their own. An old sock stuffed with paper and a little catnip, knotted at the top and dragged on a piece of string, makes a great target for predatory play aggression.

Now You See It...

Interactive toys should be securely locked away when the game is over, for two reasons. First, they may have parts that are unsafe for cats to ingest. While it is unwise to knowingly purchase toys made of dangerous materials such as tinsel or Mylar, most interactive playthings require a string or wire to distance toy from handler; these toys are safe for the cat to play with as long as there is human supervision. Second, toys are more exciting to the cat when they disappear and then suddenly reappear days later. Too often, cat owners complain that they have purchased dozens of toys that their cat ignores; this is usually because toys that are always available quickly lose their allure.

To be most effective, interactive games should be played several times a day. Engaging Simba just before mealtimes is ideal, as it completes the entire "stalk, pounce, kill and feed" sequence. Duration depends on your cat's energy and concentration levels, but three to fifteen minutes per game is usually enough time.

Interactive play provides many benefits for you and your cat. In addition to greatly reducing predatory-play attacks, a game before bedtime often calms down a nocturnal noisemaker, tiring him out enough to keep him sleeping through the night. Play sessions will also reduce your cat's stress level and help keep neutered cats in trim form. A better bond with your cat is the best by-product of all.

