

Simple objects such as cups and a few pieces of dry cat food can help your kitty show off her cleverness.



LET THE GAMES BEGIN!

REGULAR PLAYTIME KEEPS CATS' MENTAL AND PHYSICAL SKILLS SHARP

// BY EMILY SMITH

GIVE A CAT FOOD, water, fresh litter and the occasional scratch behind the ear and she's happy as a lark, right?

Not quite, says Denise Seidl, a cat behaviorist and author of the book *Fun and Games for Cats*.

"People think that cats are undemanding animals," Seidl says. Most people know that dogs need regular exercise, but we might sometimes forget that cats need that physical interaction, too.

Cats are natural explorers. While an indoor-only lifestyle is the safest choice for felines, life can get rather dull without regular activities that tap into their drive to stalk and pounce on prey. In fact, cats believe they are hunting while playing—even those who have spent their entire lives indoors, anthrozoologist John Bradshaw writes in his book *Cat Sense*.

They chase, bite, claw and pounce on toys—especially those that look like "real prey" and change shape during play, Bradshaw writes.

But games for cats aren't limited to throwing a catnip treat across the floor or dangling a fuzzy critter from a wand to simulate prey.

With problem-solving games, you can appeal to your cat's intellectual side.

"Exciting games and activities have the magical effect of turning a bored indoor cat into a happy and more fulfilled companion," Seidl says, noting that games can strengthen the bond between human and feline, as well as help correct destructive behavior, problems between cat housemates and weight issues.

If you're thinking, *Nah, my cat is too old/fat/lazy/shy*, Seidl encourages you to give it a try. Felines yearn for challenges, she says. The key is to find activities that suit your pet's age, fitness level and playing style.

Activities and toys should engage your cat's eyes, ears, nose, paws and claws, as well as her brain. Each cat has her own preference for games and toys, so experiment to find out which appeal most to your kitty.

Seidl recommends an hour of daily activity, divided into sessions of five to 10 minutes, depending on your cat's interest and fitness level.

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Most cats' energy peaks in the evening hours, which is a good time for play sessions. Try to end every game on a high note, such as by letting your cat catch the prize.

From *Fun and Games for Cats*, here are four games you can create from everyday items—cheap but effective at keeping your cat's mental and physical skills sharp.

CUP CRAZINESS

1. Place two plastic cups upside-down in front of your cat.
2. Show her a treat (or a few pieces of dry food) and then place it under one of the cups. *Extra credit:* Place the treat under a cup when she's not looking and encourage her to find it using her sense of smell. Another variation: Place the treat in one cup and set it on its side. When your cat pats the cup, it will spin and make it harder for her to grab.

PINGPONG PARTY

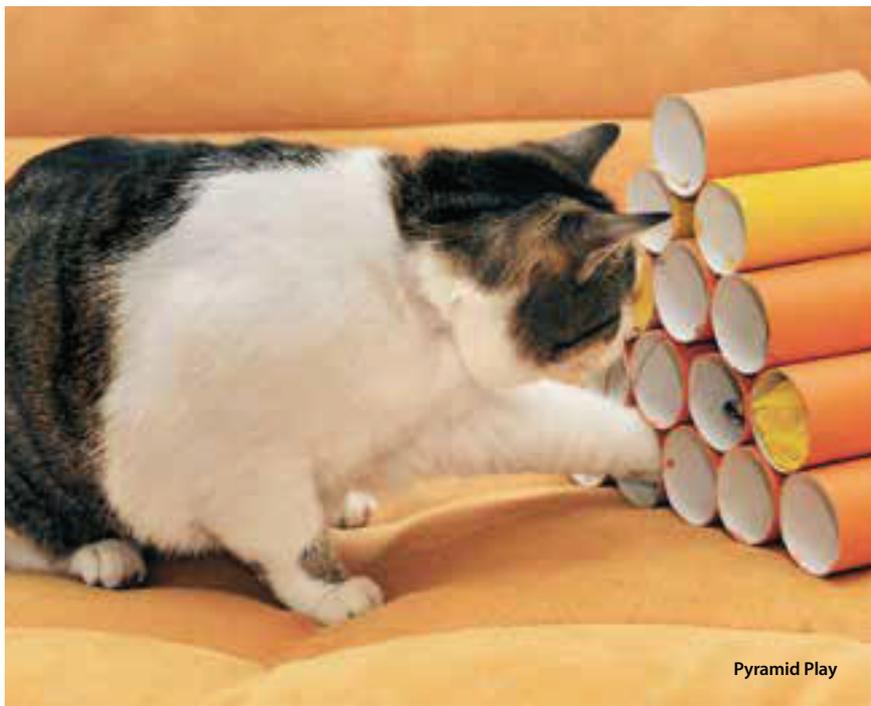
1. Put a treat or a few pieces of dry food in the bottom of a shallow plastic container.
2. Add pingpong balls, leaving enough room for your cat to move them around. *Extra credit:* Make the game more difficult by using a taller container.

WATER POLO

1. Fill a wide bowl with warm water.
2. Place two balls inside—one hard ball that will sink and a lightweight one that will float—for your cat to fish out. *Extra credit:* Use a clear bowl that allows your cat to see the sunken object from the sides.

PYRAMID PLAY

1. Glue toilet paper rolls together to create a shape such as a wall or pyramid. (If you're crafty, first cover them with nontoxic paint, paper or fabric.)
2. Use tissue paper to close some of the tubes, fill some with treats or toy mice and leave the rest empty. *Extra credit:* Push the treats/toys farther into the tubes, or conceal them behind the tissue paper.



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