



The Case Against Laser Light Play

Here at the Calgary Humane Society, we strive to provide humane enrichment to shelter cats as well as educate the community on how to provide proper enrichment to their own cats at home. Enrichment tools such as wand toys, cat nip, puzzle feeders, toys that mimic prey, scratching objects, etc. are wonderful for keeping your cat physically and mentally stimulated, but what about laser pointer toys?

Many believe that laser pointers are a great way to entice a cat to run and exercise. Hand-held ones offer an easy solution for the human who just wants to recline on the couch and watch TV while playing with their cat. There are also now battery-operated ones that will shine the red light in different directions and patterns and can be set on a timer, so the human doesn't even have to be there for playtime. Is this a good option for cat enrichment? Molly DeVoss, a certified cat behaviour expert from the US, says **no**, and here's why:

- Using a laser pointer does not mimic the *predatory hunting sequence* that is so important for cats. House cats, like their wild relatives, get a beneficial serotonin boost when they hunt, capture, and 'kill' their prey. Laser pointers do not offer this benefit because the cat is not able to catch the light. Low levels of serotonin have been shown to correlate to aggressive tendencies in cats.
- Some experts advise throwing a treat to the cat during or after play with the laser light, however, this is probably not sufficient either since eating a treat isn't the same as delivering a killing bite to a prey animal (thus no serotonin boost).
- The battery-operated automatic laser lights are much worse than the hand-held ones because they do not deliver a treat to the cat at all, and there is no one watching to ensure the cat is not getting over-stimulated from the light action.
- Playing interactively with your cat and a wand toy gives your cat several benefits – you can enact the hunt, capture, kill sequence for your cat which is a much more natural way for cats to play while ensuring your cat is actually playing and moving about. Many different types of wand toys can be tested to see what kitty prefers (mice, feathers, ribbons, worm-like creatures, and insects to name a few) and these can be changed up depending on your cat's mood. On the flip side laser, lights can't be changed in size, shape, texture, sound, or smell. With a wand toy, your cat will enjoy watching you drag or flit the 'prey' about even if they don't run to catch it – and it's a much better activity to enhance the cat-human bond.



If you feel the need to try out a laser pointer with your cat, please follow these tips:

- Use the light only for very short sessions and watch body language closely. If kitty gets over-stimulated it is probably not the best toy for your cat as it could lead to frustration and aggression.
- At the end of the play session throw your cat's favorite toy for it to capture and kill, this gives kitty something to grab onto and sink their teeth into. After this sequence, you can also throw a treat if kitty is looking for something more.

Reference:

DeVoss, Molly. CFTBS, CCBC, CRM, FFCP. April 12, 2022. "Dear Molly - Laser Light Play." [Blog post]. Retrieved from:

<https://www.catbehaviorsolutions.org/post/dear-molly-laser-light-play>

If you have more questions about toys, enrichment, and/or play techniques, please contact Behaviour Outreach at 403-723-6019 or behaviour.help@calgaryhumane.ca.