

Play and welfare in domestic cats: Current knowledge and future directions

JSL Henning, EJ Fernandez, T Nielsen and S Hazel*

University of Adelaide, School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences, South Australia, Australia

* Contact for correspondence: julia.henning@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract

*Play and welfare have long been linked within animal research literature, with play considered as both a potential indicator and promoter of welfare. An indicator due to observations that play is exhibited most frequently in times when an animal's fitness is not under threat and when immediate needs such as food, water and adequate space are met. And a promoter, because of observations that animals who play more also have better welfare outcomes. However, limited research has been undertaken to investigate this link, especially in companion animals. The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) is one of the most popular companion animals in the world, yet little is known about the impact of play behaviour on cat welfare. We review the current literature on play and welfare in cats. This includes examining the role of cat play in mitigating negative welfare outcomes, such as reducing problem behaviours, one of the leading reasons for guardian dissatisfaction and cat relinquishment to shelters. Play is also discussed as a potential tool to provide environmental enrichment and to improve cat-human relationships. Future areas for research are suggested. We find that further research is needed that uses a multi-faceted approach to assess how quantity, type and quality of play impact subsequent cat behaviour and welfare. Future research could also assess cat play needs and preferences as well as investigate the role of play in mitigating threats to cat welfare such as reducing problem behaviour and improving human-cat relationships. If play is an indicator and promoter of welfare, studies into the impact of play may offer an accessible approach for monitoring and improving domestic cat welfare.*

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