

Mother's day. Father's day. College graduations in May. Pre-k through high school graduations in June. And birthdays year round.

What is the most frightening of all of these? The recipients not enjoying their presents.

We all have pictures of our younger selves playing with refrigerator boxes or empty pots and pans, sometimes with brand new toys right next to us. When our pets enjoy the packaging more than the gift, there are several options to get them to interact with those unused toys.

Introducing the toy slowly may be a good starting point. Some animals, usually prey animals, will benefit from seeing the toy at a distance initially. Hamsters, guinea pigs and birds will appreciate the toy on the other side of the room first.

If the toy is especially large, placing it in the animal's cage where they have no choice but to interact will certainly lead to fear responses. Animals want to be able to predict what will happen in their environment. Permitting them to see that the toy does not pose a threat at a distance will allow them the security to be inquisitive about the toy later on.

Including another animal to interact with the toy will serve as clear communication that the toy is not only safe but fun — monkey see, monkey do.

An interesting fact about this option is that it doesn't have to be a conspecific (same species) interacting with the toy. A dog could play with a cat toy and when they are done with it, the cat, who was the original recipient, will start playing.

Placing a toy between cages of two animals can be very appealing to them as well. If one animal has experience with the toy, the other may not be able to resist the rivalry. Pulling the toy into their own cage, playing tug of war or shredding it together will surely get a pet to play with that unaccustomed toy.

You could always model the toy yourself; if no other pets are around. Running in the backyard with a rope toy in your mouth could get your pet really excited to play — or maybe get the neighbors talking. Rolling a ball or manipulating the new device will make the toy livelier and could kick start some natural instincts.

If the pets prefer the cardboard box or paper bag it came in, no problem. Incorporate the expensive toy with devices they already like. Rolling toys up in newspaper is a favorite with my pets. Inside could be a treat or toy, but they have to unveil it first. If they are scared of new toys, hiding it in a familiar wrap will make it more enjoyable. Attaching new and old toys together or placing one inside the other are other options.

Instead of incorporating familiar toys with the new device, food is another (popular) option. A little chow encouragement can overcome many uninterested pets. If you can't place a treat inside, rub a friendly scent or smear a little food on the surface.

Training a behavior using that new toy is one of my favorites. Teaching a pet to retrieve the new toy is a simple way to incorporate positive experiences with a neutral toy. You could also reinforce with approximations — a process called shaping.

In the beginning give your pet a treat if they look at the toy. Then make it harder, by only giving the pet a treat if they take one step closer. Keep rewarding each approximation, with each step they take until they are touching the toy. Hopefully in the end, the toy will be reinforcing in itself.

My last resort if I still can't incorporate the new toy into my pet's life is to reassess to see if the toy is appropriate. Does the toy allow my pet to increase a natural behavior easily?

Maybe that Uncle Sam's outfit you got your pet for the 4th of July party wasn't the best idea.

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