

Play-Aggression in Kittens or Cats

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Playful aggression towards human beings can occur in cats of any age. You may have witnessed play aggression before: a cat may pounce on and bite a family member who walks by, a hand dangling over the edge of an armchair, or a foot moved under the bedcovers at night. Play aggression in felines is a behavior that can be understood, improved, and managed – as long as adopters are willing to utilize suggested techniques *consistently* to ensure a happy home for both person and kitty.

The Importance of Play Behavior in Kittens and Cats

The first thing to understand is that this playful behavior is natural (to an extent) in all cats, but especially in kittens. It helps them with feline social interactions and also provides natural outlets for them to explore their drive to hunt.

Kittens begin playing with their littermates, which helps them to develop motor skills, hunting skills and to bond with their littermates. As they approach 12 weeks of age, they focus more on the “hunting” aspect of play and less on the rough-and-tumble wrestling type play with other kittens.

In adult cats, not only can playtime ease stress or depression, improve health, and strengthen the bond between cat and human, it also provides a way of building confidence.



Help! My Cat is Attacking Me!

Play aggression in cats involves inhibited biting and clawing as well as stalking and attacking people. In general, it's when cats treat people as a cat would treat prey or another cat. The term “play” aggression can be deceiving, as this type of aggression can sometimes be intense.

Play aggressive cats are usually young and very active, although some older cats are more playfully aggressive than others. These cats tend to be very high-energy and are easily bored, with short attention spans. Physically, they may be anxious, pacing frequently, and their pupils may often be dilated. They may be minimally affectionate and are usually more interested in play than petting. These cats are usually very agile and intelligent, and may be good “problem-solvers” who often get into “trouble” in the home (they may use various “attention-getting” behaviors to receive both positive and negative attention). They will usually find just about anything to play with and are very rough in their play.

Play aggressive kittens often exhibit a higher than normal energy level, and may bite and scratch harder than most kittens. These cats may get worked up with handling, petting and restraint. Often these cats treat humans as they would another cat - playing, stalking, wrestling, and biting. The cat may not stop when you want him to and may see your physical attempts to get him to stop as play.

Why Does My Cat Play by Attacking Me?

There may be a genetic component to this behavior and it may also be seen in kittens that were not raised with other kittens prior to 8 weeks of age. They missed out on learning proper “play etiquette” and were not corrected by their siblings and mother when they inflicted pain.

Often, pet parents (or people interacting with the cat) have fostered play aggression by playing with their cat roughly, or by encouraging the cat to chase body parts. In addition, other types of physical interaction, such as pushing a cat off your lap, may be seen as a physical challenge by cats who exhibit aggressive behavior. **Lack of playtime is a major factor contributing to play aggression – it is often exhibited in cats that are left alone for long periods of time.**



Types of Play – Interactive versus Solo Play

Interactive toys are the best way to play with your cat – they usually feature a fishing pole design, with a toy dangling on the end of a string or wire.

These toys are a great way to provide appropriate enrichment for your cat. It's recommended that cats receive 10-15 minutes of interactive play at least twice a day. Ideally, these play sessions will be followed by a meal. This mimics their primal routine of hunting (play) and then eating.

The other type of play for cats is solo play – toys they can play with by themselves. This depends on the cat's level of activity and ability to self-entertain, but the most common types are ping pong balls, catnip toys and fuzzy mice. They should be light enough for kitty to bat around since she will have to "bring them to life" by herself. Toys should be mentally stimulating and rotated regularly to prevent boredom.

Puzzle feeders are another toy to try with your cat. They can be made (by punching treat or kibble-sized holes in a water bottle or other rolling container) or bought and they allow your cat to work for her food. We do recommend you make sure your cat is using them before feeding all meals in puzzle toys, though.

Hands are Not Toys

It is very important whenever you are playing with *any* cat to use a toy. Never play roughly with a cat, wrestle with her, or move your hands so that the cat chases them. If you do not use a toy, the cat will learn that your body parts are toys, and that it is okay to bite and scratch people. Even if the rough play, biting, and scratching do not bother the owner, rough play can lead to other people being injured by the cat and it also stresses out the cat.

Hands should be used for things the cat will have a good association with, like gentle petting, massage and affection. When humans play roughly with cats they mimic the rough play of other cats. However, humans are not able to communicate their intentions through body language as another cat would, and they may end up confusing the cat as to whether the person is playing or being aggressive. Consequently, these cats may become confused about human interaction. A lot of times these cats will be more reserved with the person who roughhouses this way, but will then seek out other members of the home who do not seem as threatening to attack with more intense aggression. If they are receiving mixed signals (sometimes hands are good, sometimes hands are bad) – they can react unpredictably to humans (and who could blame them?).

Teaching a Kitten Appropriate Play

Get your kitten started on the right foot (er...paw), by training her how to play appropriately. By always using toys for play, you are off to a good start. However, some kittens may still try to bite and scratch people – they see everything that moves as a toy! As well, they may accidentally miss the toy and grab your hand or arm. If this happens – stop the play immediately. Playful attacks should be handled by making a sound that will startle the cat. You want the sound (it can be a clap or a high-pitched "OUCH!") to interrupt the behavior without making the kitten afraid of you (the kitten should stop biting, but not run and hide). This will teach the kitten that the biting/scratching causes play time to end. However, it's essential that this sound happens the moment the unwanted behavior happens. Otherwise, you're startling the kitten for no reason.

After a brief time-out (at least 10 seconds) where you do not give the kitten any attention, you can then resume play. You may have to sit on your hands or walk away if the cat is still trying to play-attack you. If done consistently (by *everyone* who interacts with the cat) it will decrease the chances of it happening again in the future, and over time you should see an improvement.

As well, you can try to steer the kitten's playful aggression towards toys. The first step is to give the kitten as much interactive playtime as possible. However, if the kitten is still attacking humans, you can try to intercept the behavior. If you can anticipate the attack (you may see dilated pupils, a swishing tail, or other "pre-pounce" behaviors, like hiding or crouching) you can throw a toy *just before* the kitten is about to attack. This redirects the attack towards the toy, and away from humans.

However, if the kitten has already attacked, owners should *not* offer the kitten a toy immediately – this would be rewarding the aggressive behavior and may even increase the chance that the kitten will attack in the future. It's important to note that the kitten should never get any kind of attention from you during or after an attack. Even negative attention, such as scolding, can encourage kittens and inadvertently reinforce the unwanted behavior.

Recognizing the Triggers for Play Aggression

Keeping the above tips in mind, you may be able to realize what is triggering your cat's play aggression. Here are some of the common triggers:

- Lack of play
- Too much commotion or stress in the house/frequent moving
- Not cooling down a play session before ending it, or not ending play with a snack or meal
- Sudden movements around the cat
- Physically handling the cat in a way they may see as uncomfortable

How to React to a Playfully Aggressive Attack – Dos and Don'ts

Your response to an attack from your cat can determine if the attack escalates, ends, and if the behavior will improve or worsen. Consistency is important. Understand that it may take a little while to "train yourself" to act appropriately in these instances.

Don't:

- React with quick jerk away from the cat (this is how prey responds to an attack - this can trigger continued aggression).
- Physically punish the cat - this only teaches the cat that you will play back roughly, and the cat will respond more intensely. Furthermore, if the cat is small or a young kitten, you could seriously injure the cat.
- Have a big reaction such as screaming and jumping
- Use excessive correction that makes the cat run and hide or attack – use only enough to interrupt the behavior.
- React in anger – this can cause fearfulness and stress in your cat, can escalate the attack, and most certainly will not improve the behavior.

Do:

- Use appropriate correction techniques: a high pitched "OUCH"; a hand clap
- Make sure that correction techniques are not causing the aggressive cat to fear you; as well, make sure that other cats in the household are not negatively affected by the correction techniques used on the play aggressive cat
- If you feel you must put the cat in a "time out", walk away from the cat, leave the room, and close the door behind you.

Common Questions:

What About Children?

Cats displaying playful aggression should not go to homes with young children because they could easily become the target of the cat's aggression. Most children also tend to have difficulty in remaining completely consistent in their reaction to the cat's behavior. Older children/teenagers may be okay if they understand and are willing to follow the "Dos and Don'ts" outlined above.

What About Other Cats?

Other cats may be okay depending on the individual cat, but they should have a similar energy level and temperament, and we recommend going slow for all cat-to-cat introductions. For more information on how to perform successful cat introductions, refer to [our handout](#).

What About Declawing?

Declawing is inhumane and will not eliminate play aggressive behavior. In some cases, it may even make defensive biting worse because the cat is in pain (after the declawing procedure) and unable to use their claws to defend themselves. A cat that has been declawed may then turn to biting more aggressively, which can be more dangerous than inhibited bites and scratches. Instead of declawing, we recommend that you trim your cat's claws regularly, keeping them short and providing them lots of things to scratch besides you – cat trees, sturdy scratching posts and cardboard scratchers.

Will the Behavior Improve?

Your play aggressive cat will probably always be this way to some degree since this is a personality trait. However, owners can expect behavior to improve gradually over time as long as the cat is given adequate playtime, and owners are consistent in reacting to the playful attacks. As well, everyone who handles the cat must be consistent in their response and general treatment of the cat.



If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.