

PLAY AGGRESSION IN CATS

My cat's play is starting to lead to injuries. What can be done?

Understimulation, an excess of unused energy, and lack of appropriate opportunities for play can lead to play aggression. This may be exhibited as overly rambunctious or aggressive play, which inadvertently leads to injuries to people. In some cases, the play can include a number of components of the cat's predatory nature including the stalk, pounce, and bite. Although play is usually more common in kittens, it may persist through adulthood.

As mentioned, cat play is best stimulated by moving objects that can be stalked, chased, swatted, or pounced upon. Providing ample opportunities for self-play aids in reducing play with owners. In addition, before you consider using one of the interruption or punishment devices (water sprayer, alarm, and compressed air), the cat should first receive a sufficient number of play alternatives. Anticipate your cats need to play and initiate interactive play sessions. Play toward the owners, which is initiated by the cat should never be tolerated. Owners that allow the cat to initiate affection and attention-getting behaviors run the risk of these behaviors escalating into more aggressive sessions, should the owner refuse the cat's demands. Successful interactive toys include wiggling ropes, wands, dangling toys, and those that are thrown or rolled for the cat to chase.

For self-play the cat can be provided with toys that roll such as ping pong balls or walnuts, toys that dangle, battery-operated and spring-mounted toys, scratching posts, and toys within containers that deliver food when scratched or manipulated. For cats that enjoy exploration, climbing and perching give opportunity for these. Hiding treats in various locations stimulates searching behavior that cats enjoy. Bird feeders outside of windows occupy some cats, while others might be interested in videos for cats. Catnip toys and toys with food or treats that can be obtained by scratching or manipulation, help to stimulate play and exploration. Cats with a strong desire for social play benefit from the addition of a second kitten to act as a playmate, provided both cats have been adequately socialized to cats.

How can I tell if play is about to become aggressive?

Often it is possible to see a change in your kitten's behavior that will signal to you that the play session is getting out of control. The first sign may be intense movement of the tail from side to side. The ears may go back and the pupils, the dark part of the eye may become larger. At this point it is best to end the play session before the kitten becomes too agitated.

What should I do if the cat begins to exhibit play aggression?

Wherever possible ignoring the cat, or perhaps even walking out of the room, will teach the cat that there will be no interaction or reward when he or she initiates play. Play should always be initiated by you, and not by the cat.

Physical punishment must be avoided! First, pain can cause aggression so if you hit your cat, you may increase the aggressive behavior. Second, painful punishment may cause fear and owner avoidance. Third, owners that attempt to correct the playful aggression with physical contact may actually serve to reward the behavior.

For punishment to be effective it must occur while the behavior is taking place and be timed correctly. Punishment also should be species appropriate. Noise deterrents are often effective in cats. For very young kittens, a "hissing" noise may deter excessive play behavior. The noise can be made by you, but if not immediately successful a can of compressed air used for cleaning camera lenses may be more effective and is less likely to cause fear or retaliation.

Some cats need an even harsher noise. Commercially available "rape" alarms or air horns make extremely loud noises that will startle the cat and interrupt the behavior. What is most important in using these techniques is the timing. You must have the noise-maker with you so that you can immediately administer the correction.

What should I do about my cat that hides, stalks or jumps out at family members and me?

Another component of aggressive play behavior is hiding and dashing out and attacking people as they walk by. Often the kitten or cat waits around corners or under furniture until someone approaches. This can be a difficult problem.

First, keep a journal of occurrences, time of day and location. This can help identify a pattern that can be avoided. Second, you need to be able to know where your cat is. An approved cat collar (one that has a quick release catch or is elastic) with a large bell on it is helpful. If the cat always attacks from the same location, you can be ready, anticipate the attack and become pre-emptive. As you prepare to walk by the area, toss a small toy to divert the cat to an appropriate play object. Another tactic is to use your noise deterrent to get the cat out of the area or block access to the location such as under the bed so that the cat is unable to hide there and pounce out at your feet.

Is there a way to prevent this behavior?

Treatment for this problem is much the same as for other forms of play aggression. You must provide ample outlets and opportunities for play on your terms. Perhaps schedule play sessions. These should be aerobic play sessions so that the cat gets plenty of exercise.

If your cat does not seem to be interested in these play sessions, try other toys. Some cats prefer small, light toys that are easy to manipulate. Others prefer balls or small stuffed toys. Make sure the toys are safe and not small enough to be swallowed. Provide play sessions when the cat seems interested and avoid sessions at all other times. For example, if the cat seems to be interested in nighttime play, try and circumvent problems by offering play at approximately the same time that the cat would begin. Should the cat begin to initiate the play "session" before you are ready, remember that you must ignore the cat (or use one of the interruption devices) and restart the session after the cat has calmed down. Next evening begin a little earlier so that you can "beat the cat to the punch". It can also be helpful to try and keep up your cat's interest in the toys. This can be accomplished by a daily rotation of toys so that the cat is presented with a few new items daily. Pick up all the toys and place them in a box or basket out of the cats reach. Every day take out a few toys, or a bag or box and set them out for the cat to play with. Set aside some time for interactive play with you as well.

Cats can also be trained to do a number of tricks. This is an excellent way to stimulate your cat, to interact with your cat in a positive way and to gain some verbal control over your cat. Using a few choice food tidbits as rewards, most cats can be taught to sit, come, fetch, or give.