

Cat Aggression Toward People

Cat caregivers sometimes have difficulties understanding why their cats, who seem friendly and content one minute, may suddenly bite and scratch them the next. Aggressive behaviors are part of the normal behavioral patterns of almost any animal species. Aggressive cats can be dangerous, so attempting to resolve a chronic cat aggression problem often requires assistance from a professional who is knowledgeable about cat behavior.

Types of Aggression

Play Aggression is the most common form of aggression displayed by cats toward people. All kittens and young cats must play. Play is a normal behavior that provides the young animal with opportunities to develop motor and cognitive skills, as well as the chance to socialize with others. All play consists of “mock” aggression—the cat stalks, chases, pounces, swats, kicks, scratches, and bites. Cats display two different types of play: solitary play and social play. Solitary play is directed toward objects, such as toys, skeins of yarn, paper bags, boxes, and rolled-up paper. Social play is directed toward others. Problems arise when play is directed toward people. Despite the playful intentions of the cat, people can be injured, sometimes seriously, because cat scratches and bites are painful and easily become infected.

Sometimes it is difficult to even determine if the cat is playing or if the cat is truly behaving aggressively. Two behaviors that cats show when they are playing are the “play face” (the cat’s mouth is held half open) and the sideways pounce or hop, often with an arched back. Cats tend to be quiet during play, whereas they are likely to growl, hiss, and spit during aggressive encounters. Chances are if your cat is under one year of age and is the only pet (or if no other pets will play with the cat), your cat is displaying play aggression toward you.

What to do:

- Provide your cat with a selection of toys so you can determine her preferences. In general, cats enjoy batting small toys—think balls and fake mice. They also like to stalk, chase, and pounce on toys that move like prey, such as kitty teasers and cat dancers.
- Regularly provide novel objects for your cat to investigate, such as paper bags, boxes, etc.
- Spend at least 10 minutes (or longer if your cat wants) twice a day playing with your cat, using a cat dancer or throwing your cat’s favorite toys. Schedule these play sessions to coincide with times when your cat is naturally most active and playful.
- If your cat likes to sit under things and ambush your ankles as you walk by, or grab you as you go up and down the stairs, carry toys with you and toss them ahead of you to encourage your cat to chase the toys—rather than attack you.
- Consider getting another cat as a playmate. Make sure the new cat is as playful as your current cat.
- Consider building an outdoor enclosure for your cat, complete with branches, boxes, shelves and perches for your cat to navigate. This more complex



environment with opportunities to hunt insects and chase leaves will redirect your cat’s energy.

What not to do:

- Do not encourage your cat to play with your hands, feet, or any other body part. While this may be cute when you have a tiny kitten, it will become painful and dangerous as the kitten grows into an adult cat.
- Do not buy toys that teach your cat to play with your hands, such as gloves with balls hanging from the fingers. The cat will not be able to discriminate when you are “wearing” the toy and when you are not.
- Avoid putting your cat in “time out” for playing too roughly. This can frustrate the cat and, as a result, make her even more wild and crazy the next time she tries to play with you.
- Under no circumstances should you run from your cat, hit the cat, or try to block her with your foot, as these maneuvers can incite your pet to intensify her play—or to switch from play to aggression.
- Do not punish your cat for playing too roughly. Punishing a playful cat can backfire. If you hit or slap at the cat, she may perceive this as play and become even rougher. Alternatively, she might become fearful of your hands and keep her distance from you at all times—or she might switch from play to real aggression.

If, despite your best efforts, your cat persists in playing with you, you can discourage her by spraying from a can of compressed air. Try to carry the can around during the times the cat is likely to ambush you, so you will be able to deliver the blast of air at the exact moment the cat runs at you. Other devices such as whistles and water spray can stop the cat at the time, but are unlikely to teach the cat not to ambush you in the future. Loud noises, such as the blast from a small air horn, can work, too—but we do not recommend such powerful punishment. Some cats would be so terrified they might never come out of hiding!

“Don’t Pet Me Anymore” Aggression

It is not uncommon for cats to “suddenly” bite while being petted. This behavior is not well understood, even by experienced animal behaviorists. For whatever reason, petting which the cat was previously enjoying becomes unpleasant. The bite is the cat’s signal that she has had enough petting. Cats vary in how much they will tolerate being petted or held. People often describe cats as biting “out of the blue” or without warning; however, their signals may be very subtle and hard to detect. You should become more aware of your cat’s body postures and cease petting or stop any other kind of interaction before the bite occurs. Signals to watch for include:

- Restlessness
- Tail twitching
- Ears turning back or flicking back and forth
- Turning or moving her head toward your hand

When you observe any of these signals, it is time to stop petting your cat immediately and allow her to sit quietly on your lap or go her own way. Any physical punishment almost always makes the problem

worse, as it makes the cat more likely to bite either because she is fearful or because petting becomes even more unpleasant if it is associated with punishment.

If you want to try to prolong the amount of time your cat will tolerate petting, use some food rewards. Before your cat shows any of the behaviors described above, offer her a special tidbit of food such as a tiny piece of tuna or boiled chicken. At the same time, decrease the intensity of your petting. Continue to lightly pet your cat for a short time period while offering her tidbits. In this way, petting will come to be associated with more pleasant things, and she may enjoy petting for longer time periods. Each time you work with your cat, try to pet her for slightly longer time periods using the food. If you stop petting her when she is aggressive, her behavior has succeeded. She has learned that her aggressive behavior will get her what she wants—the petting stops. Thus, it is important to watch her body language carefully and stop petting before she becomes aggressive.

Fearful/Defensive Aggression

Fearful cats may display body postures that appear similar to canine submissive postures—crouching on the floor, ears back, tail tucked, and possibly rolling slightly to the side. Cats in this posture are not submissive; they are fearful and defensive and may attack if touched.

Redirected Aggression occurs when the cat is aroused by one person or animal, but then redirects this aggression toward another person or animal. For example, if two family cats have a spat, the losing cat, still aroused, may walk up and attack the family child.

Territorial aggression is not commonly directed at people. Usually cats only feel the need to defend their territory from other cats. (Cats are highly territorial, even more so than dogs.)

What to Do

- Check first with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for the aggressive behavior.
- Seek professional help. An aggression problem will not go away by itself. Working with aggression problems requires in-home help from an animal-behavior specialist.
- Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep everyone safe. Supervise, confine, or restrict your cat's activities until you can obtain professional help. You are liable for any injuries caused by your cat's behavior.

What Not to Do

- You should never attempt to handle a fearful or aggressive cat. Cat bites and scratches become infected easily. If you do receive an injury from your cat, clean the wound carefully and contact your physician.
- Punishment will not help and will even make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make the cat more fearful, and therefore more aggressive.

If you need further assistance go to www.petsforlife.org,
www.mobilespca.org or email the Mobile SPCA
at spca@mobilespca.org



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