



ADOPTING A PLAY-AGGRESSIVE KITTEN OR CAT

Although most common in young cats, playful aggression towards human beings can occur in a cat 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. The SF/SPCA Cat Behavior Department feels that play aggression in felines is a behavior issue that can be understood, improved, and lived with - as long as adopters understand the behavior and 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 to an extent, this playful behavior is natural in all cats, and especially in kittens. Kittens need to play to develop their hunting and fighting abilities. It also helps them with social interactions with other cats/kittens and provides them with a sense of where they fit in the world and a sense of self. It's also an energy releaser – and as you may know, kittens have *a lot* of energy! Play is a very natural and incredibly important part of the development of many animals (humans too!). 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, help improve health, and strengthen the bond between cat and human, it also provides a way of establishing dominance and building confidence without leading to more intense aggression.

Help! My Cat is Attacking Me!

We described some of the most common forms of play aggression earlier – the attacking of hands and feet, pouncing on anyone who moves, and even inappropriate biting/scratching during play. In many cases, even though the bites are soft and the scratches are inhibited, owners suspect that the attacks represent a more serious and dangerous form of aggression. This in turn may help to account for why the problem has been allowed to develop: for fear of provoking increased aggression, some owners do not punish the cat for behaving aggressively (e.g. by startling or severely scolding it) as most owners who have succeeded in eliminating

this problem have done. Now we will look at the possible causes of play aggression, as well as suggested ways to correct the behavior.

Why Is My Cat Attacking Me?

Play aggression in cats involves biting and clawing as well as stalking and attacking people and generally treating 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 extremely intense, especially if the cat has started to target the human(s) in the household.

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 cats that easily become bored and have a short attention span. 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” behavior to receive both positive and negative attention). They will usually find just about anything to play with and are very rough and intense in their play. Play aggressive kittens often exhibit a higher than normal energy level, and may bite and scratch harder than most kittens that adopters have dealt with. Adult play aggressive cats often want to “call the shots” in the house and feel the need to “dominate” people through rough play or aggression. 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 movements and physical attempts to get him or her to stop as play.

There may be a genetic component to this behavior, and it may also be seen in bottle-fed 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, owners (or others 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, only cats and cats that are not getting enough playtime to suit their needs. Finally, unless owners consistently correct the behavior, the cat will continue exhibiting play aggression.

Types of Play Matter – Interactive versus Solo Play

Remember that playtime is like a hunting game for your cat. 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. With interactive toys you can imitate various types of prey – birds, mice, snakes, bugs. Remember to move the toys like prey – as if they were trying to get away from the hunter – don't dangle the prey right in your cat's face – no mouse or bird would do that! On the other hand, don't make it too hard for your cat to catch the toy – you want her to have many successes so that they play is fun and rewarding. Don't forget to "cool down" the play at the end of your play session, by slowing down the movement of the toy gradually. This way kitty is not left "high and dry", feeling frustrated and wondering what happened to the fun. 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.

Play can impact the cat-human relationship in a positive manner. It can lead the cat to associate a regular positive experience with the person. This can increase trust and is especially helpful in relationships where a cat is unsure about a particular person.

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 it, 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 for the cat 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 are not mimicking prey, but rather 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. In extreme cases, this can lead to neurotic-type aggression. If they are receiving mixed signals (sometimes hands are good, sometimes hands are bad) – they can react unpredictably to human approach (and who could blame them?).

Teaching a kitten about 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 may still 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 punished consistently by making a sound that will startle the cat. You want the sound (it can be a clap, a high-pitched “OUCH!” or saying “NO” sternly) to interrupt the behavior without making the kitten afraid of you (it should stop biting, but not run and hide). The kitten will learn that she cannot get away with the biting/scratching. After a brief time-out (at least 10 seconds) where you do not give the cat any attention, you can then resume play or other interaction with the cat. 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. Remember; give the kitten a time-out after every attack.

Recognizing the Triggers for Play Aggression

Keeping all you've read so far 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
- Excessive petting
- Not cooling down a play session before ending it
- Sudden movements around the cat
- Pointing at the cat/physically handling the cat in a way it may see as challenging

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 continuing aggression).
- Physically punish the cat - this only teaches the cat that you will play back roughly, and the cat will respond with intensified violence. 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 (this may make the cat think you just attacked him back, which could increase the aggression).
- Use excessive correction that makes the cat run and hide or attack – use only enough correction to interrupt the behavior.
- Put the cat in a “time out” i.e. carry it into a room to confine it, especially *if the cat is likely to bite you when you pick him/her up* (“time outs” may be appropriate in some cases, but many times may actually make the behavior worse – the attention they receive while being carried to another room may reinforce 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 correction that causes the cat to stop the aggressive behavior, and make sure to calmly withdraw from the cat
- Use appropriate correction techniques: verbally (a high pitched “OUCH”/ “NO” sternly/ a hiss at the cat); blowing in the cats face; or using a spray bottle of water
- 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.

More Tips on Working with Play Aggression:

- Provide interactive play at least once per day, preferably 2-3 times. Good toys include cat-dancers, fishing pole toys, string-toys. The play-session should include a “cool-down” period at the end where the toy is moving much slower so the cat is not left feeling more frustrated. You *must* be willing to set and stick to regular play routine - the cat should be given appropriate outlets for play

and plenty of exercise. Without a regular outlet, the cat's behavior will deteriorate. Also leave toys that cat can play with alone, such as balls. Try to vary them regularly to ease boredom.

- If the cat directs its playful behavior towards body parts such as hands or feet, use a verbal correction as the aggressive action is taking place and stop the interaction or play session.
- Learn to recognize early signs of play aggression - such as dilated pupils, hiding around corners, crouching. Correct the cat appropriately at the first sign of these behaviors.
- Appropriate types of correction are verbal corrections such as 'no' in a deep voice, or 'ouch' in a high pitched voice. If cat does not respond to verbal correction, you can try blowing lightly on kitty's face, clapping, or hissing. Some cats need a stronger stimulus such as a water pistol, or compressed air canister, or as a last resort gently scruffing and removing the cat from you. The latter method usually requires that you withdraw from the cat's company for a while, as they are liable to repeat the attack. If done consistently and correctly, this action will decrease the probability of the cat exhibiting the inappropriate behavior in the future.
- Do not use any type of physical punishment (including nose tapping or bottom swatting). This only teaches the cat that you will play back roughly, and the cat will respond with intensified aggression. You should only use the most minimal amount of correction needed to obtain the desired response. The point is to interrupt the aggressive event so the cat learns from that experience but to not have the correction be so traumatic that the cat begins to fear you or become defensive.
- Any type of "roughhousing" with the cat can cause its behavior to escalate into a neurotic-type aggression, and/ or reinforce and intensify the play-aggressive behavior.
- Consider putting a bell around the cat's neck, so he/she is less likely to execute a sneak attack.
- If you are open to the idea, adopting a second cat of similar age, energy level and temperament may help.
- Offer your cat more mental stimulation and by harness training to go on walks or teaching your kitty simple tricks (like "sit" and "stay").
- This cat generally needs a lot of room to romp and play. A large apartment or house is best. However, you can increase territory and create more vertical space in your home with perches and cat trees.

Some Common Questions:

What About Children?

These cats should not go to homes with young children. Children 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.

What About Declawing?

Declawing will not eliminate play aggressive behavior, because it does not address the cause of the aggression. In some cases, it may even make aggressive behavior worse because the cat knows its defenses are weakened. 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.

©m.delgado '03

If you have further questions, please phone the SF/SPCA Cat Behavior Helpline at (415) 554-3075 or email catbehavior@sfsPCA.org