

Cat: Play Aggression



Contrary to popular belief, play aggression can occur in a cat of any age. 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 people in the household. 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. This behavior peaks in most cases in the morning and evenings—just like in the hunting would. Play-aggressive cats are usually young and very active; however, even older cats can be playfully aggressive. These cats tend to be very high-energy cats that become easily bored and have a short attention span. They will usually find just about anything to play with and are very rough and intense in their play. Lack of scheduled appropriate playtime is a major factor contributing to play aggression. Play aggression is often exhibited in cats that are ignored or left alone for long periods of time without a human or animal playmate.

When dealing with this form of aggression it is important to understand that play behavior is natural in all cats, and especially in kittens. Play is a natural and incredibly important part of the development. It keeps them healthy and helps them learn about social interactions with other cats or kittens. It's also an energy releaser—and as everybody knows, kittens have *endless* energy! Kittens begin playing with their littermates, which helps them to develop their motor and hunting skills. In adult cats, not only can playtime ease stress and help adjust to a new home, it helps improve health, and strengthen the bond between cat and human.

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.

Types of Play Matters—Interactive or Solo Play

Remember that playtime is like a hunting game for your cat. Interactive toys are the best way to play with your cat, and 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, so don't dangle the prey right in your cat's face. 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 the play is fun and rewarding.

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, food dispensing 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.

Hands Are Not Toys

Never play roughly with a cat, wrestle with it, or move your hands so that the cat chases them. It is very important *whenever you are playing with any cat* to use a toy. *Even if the rough play, biting, and scratching do not bother the owner*, the cat will learn that your body parts are toys to bite and scratch.

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Teaching Appropriate Play

Get your cat started on the right paw by training her how to play appropriately with humans. By always using toys for play, you are off to a good start. However, some kittens may still try to bite and scratch people because they may still see everything that moves as a toy. Also, they may accidentally miss the toy and grab your hand or arm. If this happens it is “GAME OVER,” stop the play immediately. The kitten will learn that play stops when she gets too rough. Ignore the cat for a while and do not give the cat any attention, you can then resume play with the cat once she has calmed. 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.

You should always try to steer the kitten’s playful behavior towards toys. The first step is to give the cat as much interactive playtime as possible. However, if the cat 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 cat is about to attack. This redirects the attack towards the toy, and away from humans. However, if the cat has already attacked, owners should *not* offer her a toy immediately as this would be rewarding the aggressive behavior and may even increase the chance that she will attack in the future.

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 or ends, and if the behavior will improve or worsen. Consistency is important.

Don’t:

- React with a quick jerk away from the cat because this is how prey responds to an attack and this can trigger continuing aggression.
- Physically punish the cat because this only teaches the cat that you will play back roughly, and the cat will respond with intensified violence or she could become fearful of you. 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 because this may make the cat think you just attacked her back, which could increase the aggression.
- Put the cat in a “time out,” i.e. carry her into a room to confine her, especially *if the cat is likely to bite you when you pick her up*.
- React in anger because this can cause fearfulness and stress in your cat, can escalate the attack, and most certainly will not improve the behavior.

Do:

- GAME OVER—stop all play and calmly withdraw from the cat.
- Redirect your cat to appropriate toys. Use fetch toys or toys on stick to keep the cat away from the human.
- Provide interactive play at least twice per day, preferably morning and evening hours. Good toys include cat-dancers, fishing pole toys, string-toys. Stick to regular play routine so your cat has appropriate outlets for play and plenty of exercise. Also leave toys that she can play with alone. Try to vary them regularly to ease boredom.
- Learn to recognize early signs of play aggression, such as dilated pupils, hiding around corners, and crouching. Redirect the cat immediately at the first sign of these behaviors.
- Consider putting a bell around the cat’s neck, so she is less likely to execute a sneak attack.

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- Consider adopting a second cat of similar age, energy level, and temperament.
- Offer your cat more mental stimulation by harness training her to go on walks or teaching your kitty simple tricks (like “sit” and “stay”).

Play-aggressive cats generally need 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.

Keep in mind that 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.