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Aggression in Cats – Play Predation

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

Under stimulation, an excess of unused energy, and lack of appropriate opportunities for play can lead to play-related 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, which can be extremely intense. Although play is usually more common in kittens, it may persist through adulthood, especially in cats under two years of age that are have no other feline companions.



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Moving objects that can be stalked, chased, swatted, or pounced upon best stimulate cat play. (See our handouts on 'Kittens – Play and Investigative Behaviors' and on 'Play and Play Toys in Cats'). Providing ample opportunities for self-play, interactive play with owners and social play with other cats may aid greatly in reducing or eliminating inappropriate play with owners. Successful interactive toys include wiggling ropes, wands, dangling toys, and items that are thrown or rolled for the cat to chase. In addition, before you consider using one of the interruptions (water sprayer, alarm, and compressed air), the cat should first receive a sufficient number of play alternatives. Anticipate your cat's need to play and initiate interactive play sessions. You should not tolerate aggressive play that is initiated by your cat and directed toward you. 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.

If your cat does not seem to be interested in these play sessions, try a variety of toys with a variety of textures. 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. Playing with a few different toys in a play session is recommended since cats may tire of chasing a particular toy, but may be still willing or in some cases even more interested in continuing the play session with a new or novel toy. Stuffing the toys with food or treats may stimulate the pouncing, biting and eating associated with predation.

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Cats can also be trained to do a number of tricks. This is an excellent way to stimulate your cat to interact with you 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 shake a paw. In fact, cats that are taught to respond to these commands can often be interrupted with these commands (tricks) if a play attack or other inappropriate behavior begins to arise. (Also see our handout on 'Kittens - Introducing to a New Home').

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 activities. Hiding treats in various locations stimulates searching behavior that many 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 in the household 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 if you observe any of these signs, 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-related 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 with you should 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, attempts to correct the playful aggression with physical contact may actually serve to reward the behavior.

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For a deterrent 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 more intense deterrent. Spray cans containing citronella spray, water sprayers, and commercially available "rape" alarms or air horns should be sufficiently startling to most cats to 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. (Also see handout on 'Undesirable Behavior in Cats'). However, unless you provide ample appropriate play opportunities, punishment and distraction techniques will not be successful on their own.

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 to solve.

First, keep a journal of occurrences, including 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's attention 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. Again, these techniques are most successful when combined with plenty of opportunities for appropriate play.

Is there a way to prevent this behavior?

You must provide ample outlets and opportunities for play on your terms. These should be aerobic play sessions so that the cat gets plenty of exercise. Keep a diary of when the cat is most active and when the play attacks are most likely to occur. Then schedule the play sessions in order to prevent and pre-empt these attacks before they are likely to occur, at a time when the cat would be most stimulated to chase and pounce. For example, if the cat seems most active or destructive in the evenings, try to 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 you can "beat the cat to the punch".

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To try and maintain interest in toys, you might consider a daily rotation of toys so that the cat is presented with a few new or different items daily. Pick up all the toys and place them in a box or basket out of the cat's reach. Every day take out a few toys, or a bag or box and set them out for the cat to play. Increase novelty and interest by stuffing or coating the items with food or catnip.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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