

Understanding Cat Aggression Towards People

Cat owners sometimes have difficulty understanding why their cats, who seem to be 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. Cat bites are seldom reported, but may occur more frequently than do bites from dogs. Aggressive cats can be dangerous, so attempting to resolve a cat aggression problem often requires assistance from a professional who is knowledgeable about cat behavior.

Types of Aggression

Play Aggression

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are commonly observed in young, active cats less than two years of age, and who live in one-cat households. Play in cats incorporates a variety of behaviors such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors. Play provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival. For example, kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves. They may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects which to them resemble prey.

Aggressive behaviors can be identified as play based on the type of situations in which they occur, the cats' body postures, and the types of behaviors displayed. Playful aggression often results in scratches and inhibited bites which do not break the skin. Playful attacks often occur when an unsuspecting owner comes down the stairs, steps out of the bathtub, rounds a corner, or even moves under the bedcovers while sleeping. Play which involves aggression can be initiated by the owner or by the cat. Owners may inadvertently contribute to this problem if they encourage kittens to chase or bite at their hands and feet during play. The body postures seen during play aggression resemble the postures a cat would show when searching for or catching prey. The cat may freeze in a low crouch before pouncing, twitch its tail, flick its ears back and forth, and/or wrap its front feet around a person's hands or feet while biting. These are all normal cat behaviors, whether they are seen during play or are part of an actual predatory sequence.

For more information on rough play in cats, please see the "Kitten Play" handout.

"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 apparently 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. Although owners often describe cats as biting "out of the blue" or without warning, cats generally give several signals before biting. Owners must become more aware of their cats' body postures, and cease petting or stop any other kind of interaction before the bite occurs.

Signals owners should be aware of include:

- restlessness
- the cat's tail beginning to twitch
- the cat's ears turning back or flicking back and forth
- the cat turning or moving her head toward your hand

When you observe any of these signals, it is time to stop petting the cat immediately and allow him just to sit quietly on your lap or go his own way, whichever he prefers. Any kind of physical punishment almost always makes the problem worse, as it makes the cat more likely to bite either because he is fearful and/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. When your cat **first begins** to show any of the behaviors described above (or even before he does so) offer him 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 him tidbits. In this way, petting will come to be associated with more pleasant things and may help him to enjoy petting for longer time periods. Be sure to stop the petting **before** he shows any aggression. If a display of aggression results in the petting being stopped, then this unacceptable behavior has worked. Each time you work with your cat, try to pet him for slightly longer time periods using the food.

Fearful/Defensive Aggression

Cats who are fearful may display body postures which appear to be 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. See our handout, "The Fearful Cat" for more information on fearful behavior in cats.

Redirected Aggression

This happens when the cat is aroused into an aggressive response by one person or animal, but then redirects this aggression onto 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

This is not commonly directed at people. Usually cats only feel the need to defend their territory from other cats. Cats are however 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, and/or restrict your cat's activities until you can obtain professional help. You are liable for 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 make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make the cat more fearful, and therefore more aggressive.

