

PROTOCOL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TREATING PLAY AGGRESSION IN CATS

Cats who are weaned early and then hand-raised by humans may never learn to temper their play responses. Social play in cats peaks early (2-9 weeks) and is replaced by weeks 10-12 with behaviors like pouncing that are involved in predatory behavior. Young cats engage in true social fighting by week 14.

Play aggression is usually associated with two risk factors:

- early weaning and an adaptive shift to more predatory behaviors and
- rough play with—and often initiated by—humans.

Kittens who are raised with their littermates and by their mother usually learn to modulate their play responses because other cats let them know what hurts. Kittens who are early-weaned/bottle-fed may not have had the experience of learning normal play behaviors from other cats. Kittens who never learned to sheathe their claws or inhibit biting in play may play too aggressively with people.

Because kittens are normally very playful and chase moving objects, people often play with them using their hands or feet. This is a mistake, especially if the kitten is early-weaned/bottle-fed and may already exhibit inappropriately aggressive play behaviors. While kittens may do little damage when they play aggressively, the same behaviors in an older and larger cat can do considerable damage. The best way to avoid learned play aggression is to encourage appropriate play with toys that ensure that even if the cat makes a mistake, she cannot injure you. See the **Protocol for Choosing Toys for Your Pet**.

Cat bites and scratches cause disease. They can be seriously dangerous to someone who is already ill, is immunocompromised, or has poor circulation. You are not being mean by avoiding and redirecting your cat's play aggression. If anything, your relationship with your cat will improve.

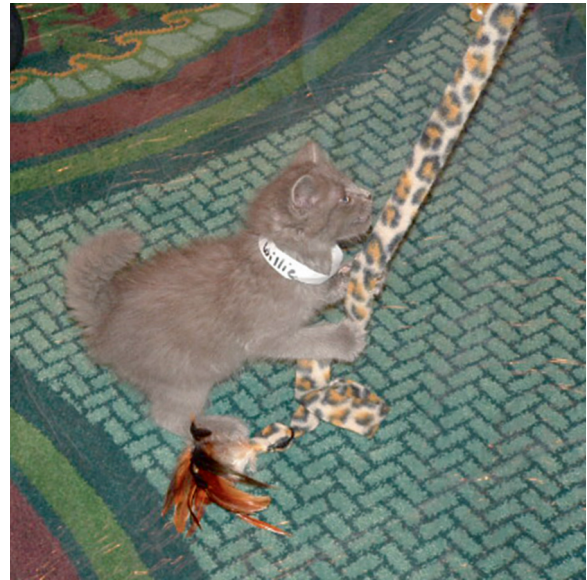
Treatment Strategies:

Treatment of play aggression focuses on three major strategies:

1. avoiding the circumstances that encourage the cat to play in this manner,
2. being attentive to the behaviors that are associated with the play aggression and interrupting those, and
3. giving the cat a more appropriate outlet for her play and energy.

Tick List for Treating Play Aggression in Cats:

1. Never play roughly with your cat, and never use your hands or feet to play with your cat. These behaviors only teach your cat that you will play roughly, and she will respond with increasingly rough play. Do not:
 - play roughly with your hands,
 - wrestle with your cat,
 - grab her by her head and shake it,
 - move your hands back and forth so that your cat chases them, or
 - pull the cat's tail.
2. Do not physically punish or "correct" the cat by flicking her nose, pinching her neck, "scruffing" her, biting her, et



Notice that this rescue kitten has fiercely used his claws to "catch" the toy and then goes on to bite it. This is *exactly* why people should never play with kittens using their hands or other body parts. As early as possible, play should be directed to appropriate toys, like this one.

cetera. Your "corrections" will not be the same as those delivered by another cat, can severely injure your cat, and will teach your cat that you are truly a threat. Cats have extremely sensitive pressure receptors around their face and at the base of their teeth and can interact safely with kittens in ways humans cannot.

3. Learn to recognize the early signs of play aggression in your cat. Cats with play aggression hide behind doors or around banisters, crouching and waiting for any

movement. They will spring, using both teeth and claws, before quickly fleeing. Expect your cat to hide in these locations and beware. Redirect the cat to a more appropriate target by throwing a toy or a ball of crumpled paper, or with a feather toy. If you know that you cannot redirect your cat, carry a towel or light sheet or blanket that you can toss over her to safely maneuver her to an area where she cannot grab anyone.

4. Put a bell on a break-away collar (Bear Bells: www.rei.com). A bell is particularly helpful for cats who pounce on human body parts or clothing, and those who are adept at hiding and waiting for you to pass. Many of these cats hide under furniture and attack toes when you sit down and move your feet. The bell will let you know exactly where the cat is and will allow you to redirect the cat or protect yourself from her.
5. Whenever you play with your cat you must use a toy. If you do not use a toy, your cat will not learn to distinguish your body parts from items signaling play. If your cat misses the toy and grabs or scratches your hand or arm, stop the play. Walk away. If you wish to continue play, when your cat is calm, can sit and look at you (see the **Protocol for Deference** and the **Protocol for Teaching Cats and Dogs to "Sit," "Stay," and "Come"**).
6. Increase the amount of your cat's aerobic exercise. You can throw rolled-up tin foil or paper for her to bat around the room. You can rig a scratching post so that she gets a treat if she scratches energetically at the top of the post. If your cat likes catnip, you can use a toy system with catnip "mice" and springs that are attached to kitty condos. You can attach a toy to extendable, flexible, elastic roping that you tie to your waist so that wherever you walk, your cat can chase a moving toy.
7. If all else fails or if you are not averse to it and your cat is young or is a kitten, consider getting another cat. Another cat often provides the perfect foil for your cat's aggressive play, and may teach your cat to inhibit some of her more damaging behaviors. Try to select a cat who is outgoing. Adopting a mother and another kitten will give your cat a normal social group in which to mature (and you save the life of the mother). Do not choose a very young kitten who could be injured by your cat's rough play.
8. Make sure that you trim your cat's claws frequently. Your cat can trim her own claws if you cover a scratching post with sand paper and encourage her to use it. Logs, scratching posts, and tree branches can be good choices for cats to scratch. Reward and praise your cat whenever you see her scratching appropriate surfaces, especially ones that are not you.
9. If your cat persists in aggressive play, banish her to another room. When she is calm, let her out and redirect her play to toys. If she is again aggressive, repeat the



Two solutions for helping cats to keep their claws trimmed: the upper photo shows a commercially available version of an inclined plane covered in sandpaper; the bottom photo shows a scratching post covered with jute rope. Both of these can be incorporated into play with cats to encourage their use as "nail files."

banishment, release, and toy offer cycle. Most play is about attention so this strategy usually works.

10. If anyone is injured by your cat, seek immediate competent medical help. This is another reason to suggest that when adopting a kitten, clients should also take the mother, if possible. Otherwise, kittens should be brought into homes with other normal, healthy cats who can help them to modulate their feline responses, and teach them to play more gently.