BEHAVIOR SERIES

Cat Aggression toward People

CAT CAREGIVERS SOMETIMES HAVE DIFFICULTY understanding why their cats, who seem 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. Aggressive cats can be dangerous, so attempting to resolve a chronic 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 types of situations in which they occur, the cat's 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. 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 her tail, flick her ears back and forth, or wrap her front feet around a person's hands or feet while biting. Most play aggression can be successfully redirected to appropriate targets. For more information on rough play in cats, please see "Managing Your Kitten's Rough Play."

"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 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. People often describe cats as biting "out of the blue" or without warning; however, their signals may be very subtle and hard to detect. You should become more aware of your cat's body postures and cease petting or stop any other kind of interaction before the bite occurs. Signals to watch for include:

- Restlessness
- Tail twitching

continued on reverse side

- Ears turning back or flicking back and forth
- Turning or moving her head toward your hand

When you observe any of these signals, it is time to stop petting your cat immediately and allow her to sit quietly on your lap or go her own way. Any physical punishment almost always makes the problem worse, as it makes the cat more likely to bite either because she is fearful 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. Before your cat shows any of the behaviors described above, offer her 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 her tidbits. In this way, petting will come to be associated with more pleasant things, and she may enjoy petting for longer time periods. Each time you work with your cat, try to pet her for slightly longer time periods using the food. If you stop petting her when she is aggressive, her behavior has succeeded. She has learned that her aggressive behavior will get her what she wants—the petting stops. Thus, it is important to watch her body language carefully and stop petting before she becomes aggressive.

Fearful/Defensive Aggression

Fearful cats may display body postures that appear 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 "Reducing Your Cat's Fearful Behavior" for more information on fearful behavior in cats.

Redirected Aggression

Redirected aggression occurs when the cat is aroused by one person or animal, but then redirects this aggression toward 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 is not commonly directed at people. Usually cats only feel the need to defend their territory from other cats. (Cats are 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, or restrict your cat's activities until you can obtain professional help. You are liable for any injuries caused by 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 even make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make the cat more fearful, and therefore more aggressive.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
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- Managing Your Kitten's Rough Play
- Reducing Your Cat's Fearful Behavior

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