

Play Aggression

Play is an important part of kitten development. It is even normal for this play to be a little rough sometimes, especially between kittens or with their mother. However, some kittens don't learn normal disengagement signals, bite too hard, use their claws, become too excited, or show rough play outside of normal play contexts (e.g., pounce on the ankles of an unsuspecting owner). This behaviour is most common in kittens that were separated from their



mothers and/or littermates too early, are not provided appropriate outlets for natural play behaviour, or when the behaviour is unintentionally reinforced by their owners. This behaviour becomes increasingly problematic as kittens grow to adulthood and are more likely to be able to cause real harm.

Foster singleton kittens with other litters or friendly adult cats

If a kitten is on their own during the sensitive phase of the socialization window (2 to 7 weeks of age), this kitten should be fostered with other kittens or a friendly adult cat as soon as possible. That way the kitten can learn appropriate play behaviour through species-specific signals. It is very difficult for humans to successfully mimic these behaviours.

Visit your veterinarian

If your cat is exhibiting play aggression, a trip to the veterinarian might be warranted. This is especially true if the behaviour is new or appears in adulthood. Behaviour medications are not usually necessary in these cases, but may be recommended in extreme cases to make cats less reactive.

Reducing the behaviour

If no medical cause is found, there are several strategies you can use to reduce or eliminate play aggression in cats or kittens who are already showing signs of this behaviour.

Positively reinforce appropriate behaviours

If your cat is playing appropriately or resting calmly, these behaviours should be positively reinforced by providing treats, praise, or petting (if this does not stimulate overarousal).



Enrich your home

Ensure that your cat is provided adequate outlets for natural play and exploratory behaviour by providing climbing opportunities, scratching posts, feeding puzzles, and plenty of solo-play toys. It is important to provide a variety of solo-play toys encouraging a range of different types of play (e.g., Kickaroo, balls, springs). Cats lose interest in toys quickly so ensure toys are rotated frequently to renew their interest¹. Consider providing at least one solo-toy that moves on its own (e.g., Undercover Mouse/Cat's Meow). See [Enriching Your Home](#) for more information. If it's right for your household, you could also consider getting another cat as a playmate!

Ensure interactive play is appropriate

Playing with your cat is very important. Research shows that cats prefer human interaction to other types of enrichment². These play sessions should be frequent, initiated by you, and scheduled to occur before times when play aggression commonly takes place. During these sessions it is important that you do not play roughly with your cat. Keep play away from your hands or body by using wand toys. If acceptable play is turning too rough, stop the play session. If necessary, get your cat away from you by distracting with a long-distance toy (e.g., throw a ball) or asking for a previously trained behaviour.

Train tricks

Cats that are prone to play aggression often respond quite well to training. Trick training can be a fantastic way to provide additional stimulation or to interrupt unwanted behaviours. It is best to teach tricks that do not involve physical contact and involve cats making a choice to move away from common targets of aggression. Consider target training or go-to-station training. See [Trick Training Your Cat](#) for more information!

Watch body language during play

Before acceptable play turns too rough, cats usually show some warning signs. If any of these behaviours are observed, end the play session. If necessary, get your cat away from you by distracting with a long-distance toy (e.g., throw a ball) or by asking for a previously trained behaviour. The specific warning signs vary between cats, but commonly include:

- Enlarging pupils
- Unsheathing claws
- Ears to the side/back
- Leg and shoulder stiffening
- Tail twitching
- Lack of pauses in play



If an attack occurs

If appropriate play progresses into play aggression, it is important that you stay calm. First try to end the session by distracting your cat with a long-distance toy (e.g., throw a ball) or by asking for a previously trained behaviour. If these techniques don't work, try to block your cat's access to you with a thick blanket. If your cat has latched on to you and won't let go, try to wrap your cat in the thick blanket and use calm but firm pressure to dislodge them. If necessary, use a loud noise to startle them. Next, place or usher them into a darkened, quiet room and give them time to calm down.



Preventing surprise attacks

If your cat is prone to surprise attacks outside of normal play contexts, consider putting a breakaway collar with a bell on them. This way people will know when they are approaching, and can prepare by protecting body parts (such as ankles) that are commonly pounced on. If there are areas of your house where your cat likes to lie in wait for someone to walk past before they leap out at them, either block access to those areas or keep a bowl of treats/toys nearby to throw so you can divert their attention, allowing for safe passage.

Do not punish

It is very important that you do not punish this behaviour. Some people think that striking a kitten on the nose when they are playing roughly is similar to the response other cats would give, and therefore teaches appropriate play. In reality, people are unlikely to successfully mimic feline behaviours which could inhibit future aggression. Your cat may learn that this is part of play, making play rougher in the future. It may also increase their reactivity or result in fear aggression.

References:

¹Hall, S. L., Bradshaw, J. W., & Robinson, I. H. (2002). Object play in adult domestic cats: the roles of habituation and disinhibition. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 79(3), 263-271.

²Shreve, K. R. V., Mehrkam, L. R., & Udell, M. A. (2017). Social interaction, food, scent or toys? A formal assessment of domestic pet and shelter cat (*Felis silvestris catus*) preferences. *Behavioural Processes*, 141, 322-328.

