



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

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