



**METRO NASHVILLE**  
ANIMAL CARE & CONTROL

### **Play Aggression in Cats**

Rough play is common and natural among kittens and young cats less than two years of age. Despite the playful intentions of a cat, however, when such play is directed towards people or becomes overly rambunctious, it can cause injury or damage household items.

Play aggression is the most common type of aggressive behavior that cats direct toward their owners. It involves typical predatory and play behaviors, including stalking, chasing, attacking, running, ambushing, pouncing, leaping, batting, swatting, grasping, fighting and biting. It's believed that through play with each other, young cats learn to inhibit their bites and sheathe their claws when swatting. The degree to which individual cats learn to inhibit their rough play varies, and those who were orphaned or weaned early might never have learned to temper their play behavior. Other factors that can contribute to play aggression are long hours spent alone without opportunities to play, and if pet parents encourage their cats to chase and attack people's hands and feet in play.

To intervene in play aggression, first determine if there is a pattern to when and where aggressive behavior occurs. If so, preempt the aggression by distracting the cat with play or denying access to places that encourage the behavior, such as under the bed if the cat hides there before pouncing. A bell on a breakaway collar may be helpful in signaling a cat's whereabouts prior to and during aggressive behavior. Any objects used to distract a cat from play aggression should be kept at a distance from your hands so that the cat cannot bite or scratch you while venting his aggression on the toy.

### **Redirected Aggression**

Redirected aggression is probably the most dangerous type of cat aggression because the bites are uninhibited, and the attacks can be frightening and damaging. Redirected aggression occurs when a cat is aggressively aroused and agitated by an animal or person he can't get at (because there's a window between them, for example). Unable to get to the trigger of his agitation, he turns and lashes out at someone—person, dog or cat—who is nearby or who approaches him. There can be considerable delay between the initial arousal and the redirected aggression, sometimes even hours. Therefore, cat parents sometimes describe this kind of aggression as unprovoked or "out of the blue." They weren't even aware of the initial trigger (for example, a cat outside who passed by 30 minutes before the attack). A redirected attack occurs only if an agitated cat is approached or there is someone close by. The cat

won't go looking for someone to redirect onto. It's not a malicious or even intentional type of aggression. It's almost like a reflex, done automatically without thought. It's never a good idea to break up a cat fight or approach an agitated cat showing defensive or offensive aggression postures.

The best way to prevent this type of aggression is to remove or avoid the stimuli, for example, by pulling down a window shade, using deterrents to keep outdoor cats away from the window, or by preventing aggressive interactions among indoor cats or frightening encounters with household dogs.

#### **Some common triggers for redirected aggression are:**

- Watching another cat through a door or window
- Watching or stalking birds, squirrels or other prey animals
- Smelling another cat's odor on a family member, a visitor or clothing
- Coming indoors after getting outside if the cat usually lives only indoors
- Hearing high-pitched noises
- Being frightened or harassed by a dog
- Having a person intervene in a cat fight
- Being in an animal shelter, surrounded by the sight, smell and sounds of other cats or dogs

#### **Petting-Induced Aggression**

Some cats enjoy being petted, held, carried and even hugged. Some merely tolerate these activities with their owners, or they like being petted but not carried. And a few don't like being petted at all. Petting-induced aggression occurs when a cat suddenly feels irritated by being petted, nips or lightly bites the person petting him, and then jumps up and runs off. This type of aggression isn't well understood, but behaviorists think that physical contact, like stroking, can quickly become unpleasant if it's repeated over and over. Repetitive contact can cause arousal, excitement, pain and even static electricity in a cat's fur. Imagine if someone rubbed your back but, instead of moving his hand all over your back, he rubbed in just one spot, over and over. That could quickly become unpleasant. Your cat might feel the same way: what started out feeling good is now irritating, and he wants you to stop. In many cases, the cat will demonstrate dilated pupils, tail lashing, and ears moved backward on the head before becoming aggressive. *When your cat signals you to stop petting, the best response is simply to stop.* It is particularly important to supervise cats that display this type of aggression when they are in the presence of young children, who often want to pet cats but miss the visual cues of impending aggression. Ideally, owners should prevent physical contact between small children and a cat with a history of petting-induced aggression.

To manage a cat with petting-induced aggression, owners should avoid uninvited handling or petting, any type of physical punishment or restraint, and attempts to pick up or interact with the cat while he is eating. Rewarding a cat with a food treat for allowing brief, light stroking without signs of aggression may also be helpful. Over time, you can gradually increase the duration of stroking, but with any sign of aggression, the you should stop the petting and begin a cooling down period with no physical contact.

**With careful observation of your cat's communication signals, you'll usually see warning signs, such as:**

- Quickly turning his head toward a person's hand
- Twitching, lashing, or flipping his tail
- Flattening his ears or rotating them forward and back
- Restlessness
- Dilating pupils
- Meowing loudly

### **Always Work with a Professional if you need more help**

Aggression can be a dangerous behavior problem. It is complex to diagnose and can be tricky to treat. Many behavior modification techniques have detrimental effects if misapplied. Even highly experienced professionals get bitten from time to time, so living with and treating an aggressive cat is inherently risky. A qualified professional can take a complete behavior history, develop a treatment plan customized for your cat and coach you through its implementation.

### **Summary**

There are several different types of aggression that cats can display, and in some cases, a cat may display more than one type at a time. Here are some general principles for managing all types of feline aggression:

- Early intervention is best.
- Any type of physical punishment can increase a cat's fear or anxiety and worsen aggression.
- Medications may help, but only in combination with behavioral and/or environmental modification.
- Recognizing aggression and startling an aggressive cat without physical contact is usually effective.
- Avoid situations that you know make a cat aggressive.
- Separate cats that act aggressively toward each other and reintroduce slowly with positive reinforcement, as described in the Territorial Aggression section.
- Food treats are excellent positive enforcers of non-aggressive behavior.
- Aggression that cannot be managed using the techniques outlined in this brochure may require consultation with a veterinary behaviorist. It is important to use the information presented here in close collaboration with your veterinarian.

**Resources:** <https://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/cat-care/common-cat-behavior-issues/aggression-cats>

<https://www.vet.cornell.edu/departments-centers-and-institutes/cornell-feline-health-center/health-information/feline-health-topics/feline-behavior-problems-aggression>