

FELINE PLAY AGGRESSION

By Margaret Muns, DVM

Problems with aggression between cats, or between cats and humans, are fairly common. However, most animals with an aggressive behavior problem are not abnormal. In the majority of cases of feline aggression, the cat is just displaying normal species-specific behaviors, which becomes intolerable or even dangerous to humans in a household.

A complicated mixture of inheritance, learning, physiology and early experience dictate whether or not a particular cat will become aggressive. Complete knowledge of normal feline-specific behavior is crucial in diagnosing the different types of feline aggression. For example, a young kitten that hides behind corners and suddenly pounces with widely dilated eyes is exhibiting normal play behavior.

Medical causes for aggression should be pursued only if a cat exhibits behavior that is unusual for the particular cat, or behavior accompanied by abnormal clinical signs. If a cat that previously loved to be petted suddenly starts biting when stroked, you should look for a possible source of pain.

Play Aggression

Play aggression is defined as the stalking, chasing, pouncing, biting, and scratching behaviors, which normally occur when cats engage in play. Problems occur when these behaviors are directed against instead of with people in the household. These types of problems usually occur in households with a single cat under two-years old. However, the problems can also surface in homes where a younger cat is living with older cats that are not playful.

Another common cause for play aggression towards humans is when owners leave a single young cat alone for most of the day. Play aggression can also be triggered and reinforced by owners who insist on letting a cat "attack" their hands and feet.

Owners must learn to recognize the postures exhibited by cats engaging in problematic, as opposed to acceptable, play aggression. The typical play aggression cat will demonstrate predatory type of behaviors. The cat will stalk the owners and pounce on moving body parts such as hands and feet. Growling and hissing usually does not occur, however, the cat's pupils will be widely dilated. Bites and scratches inflicted during a play aggression attack are usually inhibited and not severe.

In many cases of play aggression, the easiest solution is to get another cat about the same age as the aggressive cat. Usually, a cat engaging in play aggression will prefer to play with the cat instead of with humans. The only risk in getting another cat is possibly adding territorial aggression to the problem.

Cats usually do not accept a new cat into their house without reaction. Introductions must be made slowly. You must also be willing to accept responsibility for another pet and the added expense and needed care. Personally, I prefer trying using behavior modification before introducing a new pet.

Behavior Modification

You should make a concerted effort several times a day to engage your cat in acceptable play behavior. All play behaviors must be directed away from you or others in the household. Drag toys along the floor by a string.

Be sure to place all toys with a string out of the cat's reach when the animal is unsupervised. Eating string can cause a fatal intestinal obstruction.

Throw ping-pong balls, or balls made out of crushed paper or foil for the cat to chase. Leave paper bags and boxes out for the cat to play in. Another trick is to tie a toy on to the end of a small fishing pole. You can then "cast" the toy away from the cat's body and "reel" it in. You can also place bird feeders outside to entertain a bored cat.

To discourage attacks, use a technique called "remote punishment." You will first need to try to predict when these playful attacks occur. As soon as you see the cat adopt a play aggression posture, redirect the attack to a moving toy.

For this method to be effective, you need to get into the habit of carrying favorite toys around with you. If needed, you can carry water pistols or loud-noise objects. One effective noisemaker is an empty soda can with some stones inside. Hand-held air horns are usually the most effective. However, you might want to warn neighbors that you will be using these noisemakers.

An alternative to loud noisemakers is for you to lunge at the cat while stomping a foot, clapping loudly and hissing. Basically, you want the cat to think that the "sky will fall" on them if they attack you.

The timing of these remote punishments is critical. Whenever your cat begins to initiate a play attack, you should use the appropriate punishment. If you are consistent in applying the remote punishment techniques, then the problem should be quickly solved.

Never use physical punishment to fix play aggression. Grabbing your cat or hitting it on the nose or body will only make the cat more aggressive. If physically punished, many cats can become defensively aggressive.

Always avoid the temptation to let a cat "play fight" with any part of your body. Doing so is a major cause of inappropriate play aggression.