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## Play Aggression in Cats

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### Overview

Kittens are adorable, but when they are around four months of age, a dark side usually emerges – a side that involves seemingly diabolical aggression. Confused owners are often left wondering why their cute little ball of fluff has suddenly turned into a feline Jekyll-and-Hyde character.



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In an instant, a kitten may turn aggressive, inflicting painful scratches and bites. Sometimes this problem becomes so acute that it causes the owners to surrender the kitten to a shelter. They regard it as schizophrenic – a hopeless cause.

What these people do not understand is that kittens have an in-built drive to play rough. As troubling as the attacks can be, play aggression is a normal part of kittens' development. This type of aggression can be contained or diverted and should never be the reason to give up on a kitten. In time, play aggression will diminish and will eventually disappear. It is almost gone by the time most cats are around 1 year of age but may persist a while longer in others.

Play behavior is considered a rehearsal of adult roles and is helpful, though not absolutely necessary, for kittens' future development. During the process of rough and tumble play, kittens exercise just about every sense (and muscle) in their bodies, helping to prepare the youngsters for the life that lies ahead. In nature, a kitten that has played rough may have a jump-start on an unrehearsed rival and will be better equipped to chase and pin down prey.

### Types of Aggressive Play

There are at least two distinct types of aggressive play behavior by kittens, and possibly a third.

- The first type involves attack-retreat behavior. Cats do not have the same elaborate dominance-deference signals as dogs and have no need to rehearse this aspect. Instead they seem to have two primary modes, one of attack and one of retreat. It is important for them to learn how to handle themselves well in both situations, and it's better that they learn through play, when there is little or no chance of injury, than by "on the job" training later in life when the stakes are higher. The wonderful thing about play is that it is always fun and never serious. The moment it stops being fun, it stops being play. When young kittens are together, they often signal to each other that they want to play, by prancing and cavorting with their backs and tails arched. The contest then begins in earnest. First, they spring on each other, wrestling-style, looking serious about their aggressive intent. Then, as the battle begins they may roll around in a clutch for a few seconds before breaking up, with one running off and the other in hot pursuit. If you take a mental snapshot of the moment of "the clutch," you will see wild eyes, open-mouth threats, claws unsheathed, and back feet gouging forward in tandem. Almost silently, and unbeknownst to you, there is a whole lot of learning going on.

- The second type of play aggression involves predatory play, that is, hunting, chasing, and mock attack behavior. During this type of play, stealth, crouching, creeping and hiding behavior

are practiced. Springing, pouncing and pursuit behavior follow - all in fun, of course. This type of play can lead to the type of attack-retreat behavior described above, as the defending kitten repels the attacker.

- Finally, there may be a type of chasing and pouncing behavior in juvenile males that is reminiscent of male mounting behavior. This appears to be sexual play behavior. In cats, as in many other species, aggression and sex are intimately entwined.

### **How It Affects You**

Imagine you are sitting in an armchair at home, peacefully petting your kitten, when its play aggressive mode surfaces. First, a sideways glance, and then a switching tail tip, and finally the attack. The kitten latches onto your hand with its needle-sharp teeth, simultaneously stabbing at you with its hind claws. You may try to assuage this "savage" attack by further petting, but it doesn't work. Scratched, punctured, and nursing your wounds, you swear the kitten is malicious and has it in for you. Moments later you have your young friend's affection back as if nothing has transpired.

Or, you might step around a corner only to have your kitten pounce at your feet or ankles where it proceeds to rain blows and bites. Your first reaction may be surprise but pretty soon this gives way to pain and resentment. .

Luckily for us, at least we don't seem to be the subjects of juvenile cats' sexual rehearsals, but the attack-retreat and predatory behaviors alone are sometimes more than enough.

### **What to do**

- **Avoidance.** This is a good strategy for either type of play aggression. Learn to "read" your kitten's behavioral signs prior to an attack-retreat type of incident. Observe the kitten carefully for the flashing eyes and switching tail, especially during petting, and know that these signs signal the end of what may have been a peaceful moment. **STOP** petting the kitten immediately and stand up. Enough is enough. Regarding the ambush-type attacks, think ahead, wear thick socks around the house and keep your eyes peeled.
- **Diversion.** The very best diversion is to get another kitten for your kitten. Though you might think your problems would be doubled, in fact they will be halved, or they may disappear entirely. The two kittens will appreciate each other's antics much more than you do. They can learn together, and have the benefit of furry coats to protect themselves from the brunt of the assaults. If getting another kitten is not something you would or could consider, then you need to provide appropriate outlets for your kitten's need to play. Play with your kitten using mobile toys for 20 minutes each day to release pent-up energies and to allow him to exercise his chasing, catching, and "killing" drives. Engage such measures particularly if you see "that look" in his eyes - the one that tells you an attack is imminent.
- **Be patient.** Play aggression will eventually go away. Don't give up on your kitten because he is doing what comes naturally.

### **Conclusion**

The really good news is that play aggression is a passing phase. However, don't let yourself become a victim. That can create dominance issues later in certain cats. Also, rough play can cause injuries to older people, whose skin is more delicate.

You should always manage your cat properly, avoid unwanted incidents, and provide suitable outlets for its biological needs. In this way, you and your cat will be able to live together in mutual harmony without having to run the gauntlet each day.