



Timpanogos
animal hospital

PREVENTING INAPPROPRIATE PLAY IN CATS

Kittens can be taught to play aggressively by their owners. Play aggression is usually directed toward people, but it can also be directed toward other, generally older animals in the household. Cat bites and scratches are cause disease. They can be especially dangerous to someone who is already ill, is immune-compromised, or has poor circulation. If anyone is injured by an aggressive cat, seek medical help immediately. You are not being mean by controlling your cat's aggression, and cats that are under control have a better relationship with their owners.

TO CONTROL PLAY AGGRESSION, FOCUS ON THREE MAIN STRATEGIES:

- Avoid situations that encourage your cat to play aggressively.
- Pay attention to behaviors associated with play aggression, and interrupt (correct) them.
- Give your cat a more appropriate outlet for play and energy.

FOLLOW THESE STEPS TO PREVENT OR CONTROL INAPPROPRIATE PLAY:

1. Learn to recognize the early signs of play aggression in your cat. A cat that plays inappropriately will hind behind doors or around banisters and crouch and wait for any movement. It will then spring, displaying both teeth and claws, before quickly fleeing the scene. Expect the cat to hide in these locations, and be ready. At the first signs of inappropriate play, clap or use a device to deter the cat from its behavior (i.e. water gun, air horn). Some cats will be startled by a loud noise such as a clap; others will need a stronger signal such as a water gun. If you use water, the point isn't to bathe or mist the cat. The point is to startle him so that the aggressive attack is aborted. The earlier startling occurs in the sequence of events, the more effective it is.
2. Couple an adverse stimulus with a positive one. We tend to react to the undesirable behaviors but forget to reinforce the desirable ones. When your cat acts appropriately, reward him with gentle strokes and massages. Any time he plays with claws retracted and teeth unexposed, reward him with praise, love, attention, appropriate play, and treats.
3. Do not physically punish your cat. Physical punishment teaches your cat that you will play back roughly, and he will respond with intensified violence.
4. Put a bell on your cat's collar (use a breakaway collar). This is especially important for cats that play with your moving body parts or clothing or for cats that hide and wait for you to pass by. Many of these cats will hide under furniture and then attack toes when you sit down and move your feet. The bell lets you know where the cat is and allows you to perform step 1.
5. Do not play roughly with your hands! Do not wrestle with your cat, do not grab your cat by the head and shake him, do not move your hands back and forth so that your cat chases them, and do not pull your cat's tail. Every time you play with your cat, use a toy. If you do not use a toy, your cat will not learn to distinguish your body parts from items of play. If your cat misses the toy and grabs or scratches your hand or arm, stop playing and act mortally wounded. If you cannot make a sound that will startle your cat or if this is not your style,

quickly blow in your cat's face. The objective is to startle your cat so that he stops the aggressive event and learns from that experience. If done correctly, this action will lessen the probability that your cat will exhibit the inappropriate behavior again. Many stuffed kitty toys are available, or you can make some from stuffed socks. Cats like to drag toys and chew on them with their back feet.

They also like toys that can be batted and that move in unpredictable directions. Make sure the toys you choose for your cat do not have loose threads or parts that can be chewed off; these can easily cause gastrointestinal obstructions.

Frequently check your cat's toys for wear, and replace them if they are damaged.

6. Increase the amount of aerobic exercise your cat gets. Toss him a wad of tin foil or paper to bat around the room. Rig a scratching post so that a treat falls off the top when he scratches the post. Set up a toy system using catnip "mice" and springs that are attached to kitty condos. Attach a toy to a long elastic rope tied to your waist—wherever you walk your cat will be able to chase the moving toy.
7. Make sure your cat's claws are trimmed and kept short. It will be easy to keep his claws short if he uses a scratching post covered with sandpaper.
8. If your cat persists in aggressive play, stop playing with him and consider putting him in another room. If your cat is agitated, cover him with a blanket so you can safely carry him to the other room. Let him out of the other room after he has calmed down.
9. If all else fails and your cat is young, consider getting a second cat. Cats are more social than is commonly thought and enjoy the company of other cats. Caring for two cats is not than much more difficult than caring for one cat, and the company will provide your cat with an additional outlet for play. Select a second cat that is also outgoing. Do not select a young kitten that could be injured by your cat's rough play. Furthermore, if the second cat plays appropriately, it will be able to correct your aggressive cat in a feline-specific way.

Taken from Karen L. Overall