

Managing Your Young Cat's Rough Play

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are common in young, active cats less than two years of age, and in cats that live in one-cat households who don't have enough mental and physical stimulation. When cats play, they incorporate a variety of behaviors into their play, such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors. Play provides cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival. Cats like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves, and may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects that resemble prey.

Kittens learn how to inhibit their bite from their littermates and their mother. A kitten that is separated from her family too early may play more roughly than a kitten that has had more valuable family time. In addition, if humans play with a kitten or young cat using their hands and/or feet instead of toys, the cat is liable to learn that rough play with people is okay. In most cases, it is possible to teach your kitten or young cat that rough play isn't acceptable behavior. You can do this by taking your kitten to a kitten socialization class, offered at some local animal shelters and by doing the following things:

Encourage Acceptable Behavior

Redirect your young cat's aggressive behavior onto acceptable objects like toys (see our handout: "Cat Toys and How to Use Them"). Drag a toy along the floor to encourage your cat to pounce on it, or throw a toy away from your cat to give her even more exercise chasing the toy down. Some cats will even bring the toy back to be thrown again! Another good toy is one that your cat can wrestle with, like a soft stuffed toy that's about the size of your cat, so she can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick it with her back feet. This is one of the ways cats play with each other, especially when they're young. It's also one of the ways they try to play with human feet and hands, so it's important to provide this type of alternative play target.

Since young cats need a lot of playtime, try to set up three or four consistent times during the day to initiate play with your cat. This will help her understand that she doesn't have to be the one to initiate play by pouncing on you.

Discourage Unacceptable Behavior

You need to set the rules for your young cat's behavior, and every person your cat comes in contact with should reinforce these rules. Your cat can't be expected to learn that it's okay to play rough with Dad, but not with the baby.

- Use aversives to discourage your cat from nipping. You can apply taste aversives to your hands. If you have sensitive skin you may want to wear gloves and put the aversive on the gloves. The possible disadvantage to this method is that your cat may learn that "hands with gloves taste bad and those without gloves don't." For more information on aversives, see our handout "Aversives for Cats." Remember that aversives will only work if you offer your cat acceptable alternatives.

- Redirect the behavior after using the aversive. Once your cat has tasted the aversive and pulls back, IMMEDIATELY offer her a toy to wrestle with or chase. This will encourage her to direct her rough play onto a toy instead of a person. We recommend that you keep a stash of toys hidden in each room specifically for this purpose.
- Withdraw attention when your cat starts to play too roughly. If the distraction and redirection techniques don't seem to be working, the most drastic thing you can do to discourage your cat from her rough play is to withdraw all attention when she starts playing too roughly. She wants to play with you, so eventually she'll figure out how far she can go if you keep this limit consistent. The best way to withdraw your attention is to walk away to another room, and close the door long enough for her to calm down. If you pick her up to put her in another room, then you're possibly rewarding her by touching her. You should be the one to leave the room.

Please Note: None of these methods will be very effective unless you also give your young cat acceptable outlets for her energy, by playing with her regularly and using appropriate toys.

What Not To Do

- Attempts to tap, flick, or hit your cat for rough play is almost guaranteed to backfire. Your cat could become afraid of your hands, or she could interpret those flicks as playful moves by you and play even more roughly as a result.

Aggression: Cats can bite or scratch through the skin. In these cases it's best to seek help from a behavior specialist to work with your young cat's behavior. Be sure to keep your cat confined until you can get professional help. Also, be sure to thoroughly clean all bites and scratches and consult your physician, as cat scratches and bites can easily become infected (see our handouts: "When the Behavior Helpline Can't Help" and "Understanding Cat Aggression Towards People.")