

# Feline Play Aggression

By Michelle Posage, DVM



A cat will scratch you for any number of reasons. Perhaps he is feeling fearful, painful, or defensive. A cat will scratch and bite because they love you...or at least love playing with you.

It's called play aggression and it is the most common type of aggressive behavior that cats exhibit toward their owners. The behavior may be merely annoying when the cat does not cause injury, but the problem is more serious when wounds are involved. It is also dangerous if the victim suffers from a compromised immune system, has a bleeding disorder, or is a child.

This behavior generally occurs in young, energetic cats that live without other feline companions. The playful cat enjoys stalking and attacking moving targets, especially the unsuspecting owner. The problem is often made worse if the owner is away from the home for long hours, leaving the cat isolated with limited opportunity for social interaction.

The attacks usually occur when the owners are moving about the house, unaware of the impending onslaught. All the while, Fluffy is hiding and silently waiting for the perfect moment to attack. Unlike other types of aggression, there is no warning and the assault is usually silent. The entire event is over as quickly as it started.

Kittens will normally play roughly with each other. However, when the pouncing, swatting, and biting get to be too much, one of the kittens will stop and display defensive body language. In this way, the kittens learn a more inhibited, gentler form of play. Without proper feline social interaction, a kitten may enter adulthood with inappropriate play behavior.

There are several things you can do if your cat engages in aggressive play. Consider the following:

- Clean all wounds immediately and thoroughly. Cat scratches and bites are notorious for causing infection.
- Trim your cat's nails regularly.
- Never use your hands or feet to play with your cat. Do not engage in wrestling or teasing with your fingers or toes.
- Initiate daily play using toys that encourage chasing. The fishing pole-like toys are almost always a favorite and most cats will love chasing the dot from a laser pointer.
- Make sure your cat gets plenty of mental stimulation. Offer food puzzles, rotate toys, and hang a bird feeder outside a window to engage your cat.
- Anticipate attacks. Many cats have a favorite stalking area. Be prepared to redirect your cat's attention by throwing a small toy as you walk by.
- Get another young, outgoing cat. It may not always be an option, but this solution often works better than any other.

As cats get older and become less active, this type of aggression will often naturally resolve. However, there are many other reasons for aggression that do not improve with age. If your cat is hissing or growling before an attack, there may be a different cause. You should discuss any aggression problem with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist.

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