



PAWS[®] CHICAGO

PLAY AGGRESSION

CONGRATULATIONS ON ADOPTING YOUR NEW FAMILY MEMBER!

"Play aggression" is a term used to describe feline behaviors associated with a cat's natural predatory tendencies. These behaviors are considered aggressive when directed at humans. If a cat's environment does not allow him to channel his normal, instinctual predatory drives in an appropriate manner, the cat may bite and/or scratch human caregivers due to frustration.



Never use your hands or feet as a "toy" when playing with your cat.

Additionally, there are some cats who were played with roughly or whose previous human caregivers used hands and feet as "toys." These cats were inadvertently taught that it is acceptable to bite and scratch humans, similar to the way they would typically bite and scratch feline companions during play.

Cats who were not exposed to other cats and kittens during the important socialization stage of development may also have poor bite inhibition. They never learned that hard bites and scratches during play are not acceptable. These cats, like all cats, need appropriate outlets for channeling their predatory drives. There are a number of things you can do to manage play aggression in the home, while keeping your cat happy and safe.

Managing Play Aggression in the Home

Engaging your cat in structured play can help channel your cat's energy in a safe way. Structured or interactive play consists of using toys to mimic the prey species your cat would hunt for in the wild. Wand toys with feathers and long ribbons can be used to mimic the natural movements of rodents, snakes, or birds. The goal is get your cat to go through a sequence of observing, stalking, chasing, pouncing, and catching the wand's attachment like he would in an outdoor setting with a real prey species.

The following link takes you to a video on structured play from Cat Behavior Specialist Jackson Galaxy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqdnhtMYJ7Q>

Try to provide your cat with at least 2-3 structured play sessions throughout the day. Ideally, these sessions should last for 10-15 minutes. Cats easily become bored with the same toy, so you will want a few different kinds of wand toys. These should be stored in a location that the cat cannot access, so they remain novel to him and as a safety precaution. If your cat seems to get bored playing with one toy after 5 minutes, you can try introducing a new toy to extend the play session.

After a play session, your cat may be in a heightened state of arousal. Do not attempt to interact with him through petting until he is calm and relaxed. Offering him a food reward or meal at the end of a play session can help redirect his attention away from the game, provide him with a satisfying reward for a successful "hunt," and help calm him down from an excited state.





Laser pointer play is a great way to provide your cat with extra enrichment. Make sure you use the red dot to lead your cat to food and toy rewards throughout the play session.

You can also mix things up by using a laser pointer to help the cat expel energy. Keep in mind, though, that you need to have treats or food placed strategically throughout the play area. Use the dot to occasionally lead the cat to a food reward. If you don't incorporate food rewards into a laser pointer play session, you may frustrate the cat since he can never actually catch the red dot.

You can also place soft toys throughout the play area while using the laser pointer. Since the cat can never grab onto the red dot, move the dot so it's on top of one of the toys, and keep it there. This way, the cat can actually grab onto a toy that he can grab and bite.

Conducting one of these play sessions about an hour before you plan to retire for the evening is a good idea. Tiring him out through play and then feeding him will hopefully get him to sleep through the night and not disturb you while you are trying to sleep.

Immediately stop any play session if the cat grabs onto or nips at any part of your body. If this happens, leave the room for a few minutes and cease any and all interactions until he has time to calm down. We need to teach him that certain behaviors (biting and scratching people) result in all the fun and attention he craves being taken away. Never yell or physically punish your cat if he behaves inappropriately. This will only make him fearful of you.

How to Anticipate and Respond to Inappropriate Behavior

The nips and scratches accompanying play aggression can sometimes be hard to predict. Cats prone to play aggression typically won't hiss or growl. Their tails usually don't twitch rapidly, and their fur doesn't stand on end. Watch out for the following behaviors which usually precede an "ambush":

Silent stalking – the cat appears to be stalking you or hiding behind objects (doors, chairs, etc.) and staring intensely at your arms or legs in much the same way he stares at his wand toys before getting ready to pounce.

While staring at you, the cat gets into a crouching position while his rear end wiggles.

If you notice your cat engaging in any of these behaviors while not in the middle of a play session, find a toy that can be tossed (a toy ball or mouse) to interrupt his concentration and allow him to chase after and bite into something appropriate. You may need to clap loudly to initially interrupt his focus before tossing him a toy to chase.

If your cat does make contact with your body, freeze, and let out a squeak or yelp to interrupt the behavior. Wait for the cat to release and leave your space before moving. You can also offer him a stuffed toy with which to redirect his attention before exiting the cat's space. Do your best to stay calm since extreme responses can sometimes cause a cat's aggression to escalate, and leave the room for a few minutes. Withdrawing attention is something a cat's mother and littermates engage in when a kitten bites too hard or displays inappropriate behavior. Ignore the cat, and do not offer pets or verbal praise until he is calm, relaxed, and behaving appropriately.



Don't let your cat sneak up on you! Fitting your cat with a break-away bell collar can alert you to the cat's presence before he has a chance to pounce.



This cat is readying herself to pounce. Interrupt her focus, and provide her with a toy that she can chase after before she has a chance to pounce on you.



The Cat Kickeroo is a popular toy that can be used to redirect your cat's attention to an appropriate object if he is in a high arousal state. Many cats enjoy biting, kicking, and scratching toys like the Kickeroo as an alternative to their owner's arms and legs.

Environmental Enrichment

Environmental enrichment is a great way to provide your cat with objects and activities that he can investigate, explore, and play with when you are unable to actively play with him. Boredom can result in inappropriate attention-seeking behaviors for many cats, so it's important to give them an interesting and enriched environment to keep their minds and bodies active and engaged.



Cat trees

Cat trees are great for exploration and viewing one's territory from a safe vantage point. Place near a window if possible.



Window perches

Window perches are excellent for lounging and watching exciting outdoor activities.



Cardboard boxes and paper bags

Hide treats and toys in cardboard boxes and paper bags (handles cut off) to encourage your cat to explore the environment in a fun and inexpensive way.



Stuffed toys and balls

Self-directed object play allows cats to practice their hunting skills independently. Have a variety of stuffed toys and balls around the home for your cat to investigate and explore.



Catnip

⚠ Catnip is tons of fun for many cats, but it could also overstimulate your cat. Avoid offering catnip to cats with a history of play aggression.



Electronic toys

Electronic toys mimic the movements of prey species, and encourage cats to practice their hunting skills independently.



Puzzle feeders

Puzzle feeders extend mealtime and provide mental enrichment for cats as they discover how to reach the food.

Short on cash? There's even a website that shows cat owners how to make their own puzzle feeders from everyday household objects:

<http://foodpuzzlesforcats.com/homemade-puzzles>



Pavlov's Cat

Pavlov's Cat is a puzzle feeder and scratching post in one! It reinforces using appropriate scratching surfaces by rewarding your cats with a treat or dry food every time they use the post.

If you are having difficulties managing your cat's play aggression, please contact us at adoptions@pawschicago.org or emayes@pawschicago.org. We can direct you to someone who can help.

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