



## Understanding Cat Aggression towards People

Cat owners sometimes have difficulty understanding why their cats seem happy and friendly one minute, but will bite and scratch them the next. Aggressive behaviors are part of the normal behavioral patterns of almost any animal species. Cat bites are seldom reported, but probably occur more frequently than dog bites. Aggressive cats can be dangerous, so attempting to resolve a cat aggression problem often requires assistance from an animal behavior specialist who is knowledgeable about cat behavior.

### Types of Aggression

#### Play Aggression

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are commonly observed in young, active cats around two years of age, that live in one-cat households. Play incorporates a variety of behaviors, such as exploratory, investigative and hunting/predatory, and provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival. For example, kittens like to explore and investigate anything that moves. They may bat at, pounce on, leap at and bite objects that resemble prey, or are in motion, such as your legs as you walk past.

Playful aggression often occurs when an unsuspecting owner comes down the stairs, steps out of the tub, rounds a corner, or even moves under the bedcovers while sleeping. These playful attacks may result in scratches and inhibited bites which don't break the skin. Don't make the mistake of inadvertently initiating aggressive behavior by encouraging your cat to chase or bite at hands and feet during play. The body postures seen during play aggression resemble the postures a cat would normally show when searching for or catching prey. A cat may freeze in a low crouch before pouncing, twitch her tail, flick her ears back and forth, and/or wrap her front feet around a person's hands or feet while biting. These are all normal cat behaviors, whether they're seen during play or are part of an actual predatory sequence. Most play aggression can be successfully redirected to appropriate targets; however, it may still result in injury

#### Petting-induced Aggression

Some cats will suddenly bite while they're being petted. This behavior isn't well understood, even by experienced animal behaviorists. Over-stimulation may be a cause while some other theories name static electricity as a possible reason for this type of aggression, but as of yet nothing definitive has been found. Petting can unexpectedly become irritating and unpleasant for a cat, as if a switch had been flipped. The cat can show enjoyment for the initial three strokes but will attack your hand on the fourth one. If you don't recognize your cat's body language warnings telling you she is done, most cats will resort to biting as the ultimate signal that you must stop petting. Cats vary in how much they'll tolerate being petted or held. Although people often describe their cats as biting "out of the blue" or without warning, cats do give several signals before biting.

You should become more aware of your cat's body postures, and cease petting or stop any other kind of interaction *before* a bite occurs. Signals to be aware of include:

- Restlessness
- A swishing/twitching tail
- Ears turning back or flicking back and forth
- Your cat turning or moving her head slowly toward your hand

When you observe any of these signals, stop petting your cat immediately and allow her to sit quietly on your lap or go her own way, whichever she prefers. Any kind of physical punishment almost always makes the problem worse, because your cat is more likely to bite either because she is fearful and/or because petting becomes even more unpleasant if it's associated with punishment.

You can try working with treats as you pet your cat in an attempt to increase the amount of time you can pet her. Be careful as you work with her and continue to watch her body language. You can also just accept that this is who your cat is and continue to limit the petting to an amount she can comfortably tolerate.

### **Fearful/Defensive Aggression**

Cats are both predators as well as prey, so their fearful and defensive behaviors aren't always without cause. Cats who are fearful may display body postures which appear to be similar to canine submissive postures - crouching on the floor, ears back, tail tucked, and possibly rolling slightly to the side. Cats in this posture are not submissive – they're fearful and defensive and may attack if touched. All of their claws are ready to be deployed if needed, so it's best to leave the cat alone and sit at a distance.

### **Redirected Aggression**

Redirected aggression occurs when a cat is aroused into an aggressive response by one person or animal, but then redirects this aggression onto another person or animal. For example, if two family cats have a spat, the losing cat, still aroused, may walk up and attack the family child. This type of aggression can also happen if a cat gets upset when an outside animal is spotted. This cat can turn and attack another cat who is sitting close by. The cat can stay in a state of arousal for quite some time until the hormone that's involved dissipates in the body.

### **Territorial Aggression**

Cats are highly territorial, even more so than dogs; however, they usually only feel the need to defend their territory from other cats. Territorial aggression in cats isn't commonly directed at people.

### **What to Do**

- Check first with your veterinarian to rule out any medical reasons for your cat's aggressive behavior.
- Learn to read your cat's body language.
- Seek professional help. An aggression problem won't go away by itself. Working with aggression problems requires in-home help from an animal behavior specialist.
- Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep everyone safe. Supervise, confine and/or restrict your cat's activities until you can obtain professional help. You're liable for your cat's behavior.

### **What Not to Do**

- You should never attempt to handle a fearful or aggressive cat. Cat bites and scratches become infected easily. If you do receive an injury from your cat, clean the wound carefully and contact your physician.
- Punishment will very likely make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make your cat more fearful, and therefore more aggressive.

**Need help? Call our free Pet Behavior Help-Line at (503) 416-2983.**