

PLAY AGGRESSION IN CATS

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Some cats have a tendency to play too roughly or inappropriately with humans. The good news is that although play aggression is a common issue with indoor cats, it can often be easily treated.

Rough play is common and natural among kittens and young cats but can be disruptive to daily life if you don't know how to handle this behavior. Despite the playful intentions of a cat, when such play is directed toward people or becomes overly rambunctious, it can cause injury to people or damage household items.

Play aggression is a common behavior concern that cats direct toward their owners. It involves typical predatory and play behaviors, including leaping, pouncing, running, batting, swatting, grasping, stalking, chasing, attacking, fighting and biting.

It's believed that through play with each other, young cats learn to inhibit their bites and sheath their claws when swatting. The degree to which individual cats learn to inhibit their rough play varies, and those who were orphaned or weaned early might never have learned to temper their play behavior. Other factors that can contribute to play aggression are long hours spent alone without opportunities to play and if pet parents encourage their cats to chase and attack people's hands and feet in play. The good news is that although play aggression is a common issue with indoor cats, it can often be easily treated.

Let's start with a few things to avoid:

1. Do not pull your body away from the cat if they have engaged in play behavior with you. We know this is against your instincts, but you must not pull or tug away from the cat because it only encourages them to play more.
2. Avoid playing with your cat with items attached to your body (like a hoodie string or a necklace) or your body itself. This includes roughhousing, wrestling with the cat, pulling their tail or moving your hands back and forth in front of their face to entice them to chase.
3. Do not punish the cat physically by flicking their nose, scruffing or any other physical interaction that can induce play or fear aggression in the cat.

Where can your cat put that energy?

1. *Play every day*- Provide directed play with your cat for at least 15 minutes twice a day. Try to schedule these sessions around the times of day when your cat tends to be more active.
2. *Use interactive toys*-Wand toys, laser pointers and rolled up balls of tin foil to throw and play fetch with work well. Play with your cat and allow them to catch the toy frequently. If possible, end the play session with a catch of the toy and then feed the cat a small meal so that they can take a nap after having completed a full predatory motor function.
3. *Provide engaging toys* -Provide engaging toys for when your cat is alone! Some suggestions include giving catnip mice and feeding their meals using food puzzles (toys that slowly dispense dry food as the cat bats it around). Rotate these toys a couple of times a week or make them more enticing for your cat by adding food, catnip or tuna fish scents. Find what your cat really likes and vary what you give them so that your cat can play while you are away. ^(over)



4. **Environmental Enrichment**- Boredom is a major contributing factor to play aggression. You can do a lot to make your home a kitty haven and help address this issue. Giving your cat the ability to climb is always a good option. Provide them with cat trees, window perches, cat wall shelves, and other items to climb. Paper bags, cardboard boxes and other hiding spots away from high-traffic areas in the home can also give an additional outlet for activity or rest.
5. **Time outs**- These are good for when your cat gets overly worked up. You can place your cat into a room away from the action until they calm down. If the cat is too worked up to safely handle, you can leave the room and close the door behind you.
6. **Learn early signs of arousal and pouncing behavior**- Cats will often hide behind a door or under a table, waiting for you to walk past. When approaching your cat's stalking spot, redirect that energy with a feather toy or by throwing a ball. You can also place a bell on your cat's collar so you are more aware of their location in the house and you won't get ambushed by your cat.
7. **Nail Trims** – Trim your cat's nails frequently or place soft paws on them so they are less sharp when they try to play with you inappropriately.

Remember, your cat doesn't mean to hurt you when they play in this way! They just haven't learned proper manners.

We are always here to help! You can find additional behavior and training resources at pasadenahumane.org/behavior.

Adapted from Northeast Animal Shelter



PASADENA HUMANE

361 S. Raymond Ave.
Pasadena, CA 91105
pasadenahumane.org